

## **I'm Not Spartacus**

I recently came across an article online, originally published in The Atlantic, titled "What I Learned About Life at My 30th College Reunion". As it happened, I had just been to a reunion - in my case a high school one and, I have to admit, well beyond the 30th - so I read the piece with interest.

I'm always on the lookout for column ideas - (It's harder than you'd think. Suggestions welcome.) - and I thought reunions might be a fertile topic. Most people probably have an opinion on them one way or another. They love them and look forward to them; they're horrified by the thought of being surrounded by a bunch of zombie-like old people; or, like me, they're somewhat ambivalent about them.

The Atlantic author lists 30 "shared truths" which came to her during her reunion. I don't have space to go into most of them here, but some were quite interesting. This was a Harvard reunion and many from the class became wealthy bankers and lawyers. But were they happy? According to truth #3 - "Most classmates who became lawyers seemed unhappy and were itching for a change." Really? This seems like a bit of a lawyer cliché. But maybe it's true.

And how about the bankers? Truth #14 - "Most bankers said they wanted to quit Wall Street to take up some sort of art." *Art?! Just what sort of "art" would that be?* This smacks of something a banker might say at a reunion but would be unlikely to actually do.

Other "truths" were painfully obvious, such as #20 - "Most of our knees, hips and shoulders have taken a beating over time." No kidding. Which reminds me - I'm late for my physio appointment.

And then there were insights like #10 - "Those who chose to get divorced seemed happy." And #11 - "Those who went through an unwanted divorce seemed unhappy." And #12 - "Many who were in long-lasting marriages experienced a turning point when their early marriage transformed into a mature relationship."

So interesting stuff, all in all. There could be a column - or a comedy - in there somewhere.

But one truth in particular caught my eye: #13 - "Nearly all of the alumni said they were embarrassed by their younger selves." I found this a bit surprising. I can't say I spend a lot of time thinking about my "younger self". But this called to mind a small, half forgotten incident out of the mists of time. My part in it embarrassed me then, and, since I'm writing this, perhaps it embarrasses me just a little bit to this day.

And it gives rise to an age-old question: Is an apology 50 years after the fact worth the paper it's written on?

I remember the day clearly: an unseasonably warm spring afternoon in Ottawa, more than half a century ago. A drowsiness-inducing grade eleven Latin class. I was daydreaming, trying to stay awake.

A petite girl - I'll call her Miss B. - rose to her feet, looking nervous, but resolute. (I know, I know. "Petite girl" sounds sort of sexist. I should probably say something like "a feisty young woman of small stature." But I'm trying to evoke a scene from over 50 years ago. And in the context of that time and the societal attitudes that prevailed, a "petite girl", indeed a "mere girl", more accurately conveys how she was seen, which actually made what she did even more remarkable...)

So why had Miss B. stood up? What was she doing? The teacher, I'll call him Mr. X., hadn't called on her.

Then she crossed the Rubicon.

She began to speak. And what she said was startling. Heck, it was revolutionary. She demanded that Mr. X. start teaching us -- better. "We're not covering the material," she said. "We're not learning Latin! Our Caesar is second rate. Our Cicero sucks. The other Latin class is miles ahead of us. But we're all going to have to write the same final exam, and the playing field is severely tilted against us because you, Mr. X., are doing a lousy job of teaching us."

Well, even the drowsiest among us was wide awake now. Mr. X. glared at her in dudgeon and disbelief. And no wonder. It was a different age. Teachers, even mediocre ones, were almost godlike figures of authority. You simply didn't challenge them like that back then. In this more egalitarian age it would take some nerve to do so even now.

And then came the pivotal moment, the moment that turned the rest of us from onlookers into involuntary actors in this mini drama. "It's not just me," Miss B. said. "Everyone in the class agrees with me."

Now Mr. X. was not a gifted teacher, but he had a crafty side and an innate understanding of the power dynamic in the classroom of 50 years ago. Red-faced, he grabbed a pad and pen and confronted his petite antagonist. And us. "Anyone who agrees with Miss B. stand up," he said. "I'll be happy to take your name."

And there he stood, pen poised like a stiletto, daring us to rise and be counted. "I'm waiting," he said. Miss B. also turned to us, silently soliciting our support, our solidarity.

Perhaps you remember the famous scene in the movie Spartacus with Kirk Douglas. The slaves who had taken part in the uprising have been captured and rounded up. The Roman general, a supremely slimy Laurence Olivier, promises to pardon them. All they have to do is identify their leader, Spartacus.

Stand-offs like this are a staple of Hollywood movies, following a predictable formula. Protagonist and antagonist stare each other down. The clock ticks, tension builds. Supporting players, cowed, lower their eyes. And then, at the last possible second, there's a scraping of a chair, everyone turns, and the unlikeliest of kids – the chubby kid, the nerd – trembling with bravery, gets to his feet. And says – "I am Spartacus." And then another stands. "I am Spartacus." And another -- until the whole class is standing, speaking as one – "I am Spartacus." Or in our case: "I support Miss B."

And the moral is clear. You may just be a lowly spear carrier in Spartacus's army, or a mere girl, but if you muster your courage and stand up for what's right, you'll be vindicated. People will rally behind you. Right will prevail. The universe will unfold as it should. It's a sure-fire formula. In the movies.

And events in Latin class that day hewed to that Hollywood scenario. Up to a point. Mr. X. scanned the room, gimlet-eyed. "I'm still waiting."

Miss B. looked around at us as well, expectantly, hopefully, perhaps a little naively.

We squirmed in our seats, avoiding eye contact, intently studying the nicks and gouges in our desk tops. For me, sitting amidst the squirmers, rationalizations for inaction came easily. Miss B. wasn't a particular friend

of mine. I hardly knew her. I didn't owe her any loyalty. Why did she have to stir things up, put us on the spot like this? It was only Latin after all, not something crucial to our futures -- like trigonometry.

"Come on, people," said Miss B., almost pleading. "I know you agree with me." Of course we did. I knew, we all knew, that she was right. Mr. X. was a lousy teacher. And what could he do to me, really? I was a good student with high marks. He couldn't conceivably fail me. The worst he could do was mark me a little harder, send me out into the world saddled with a B in Latin. And I didn't know that he'd even do that. It may all have been a bluff. So I didn't have much to lose, nothing really, and I knew in my gut that I should stand up.

But I didn't.

No one did. No one seized their Spartacus moment and stood to support Miss B.

"Well, obviously no one agrees with you, Miss B.," declared Mr. X. with a hint of smugness. Defeated, she started to sit down. "No, no. Stay as you are."

And he made her remain standing, shamed, for the rest of the class. I was worried that she might start to cry, but she was made of sterner stuff than that. But Mr. X had won. Miss B. had been faced down. And let down by each of us. And I knew even then that this had been a little test, a tiny harbinger of other larger tests of nerve, or judgment, or integrity that life would bring. And I'd failed. Abjectly.

I never spoke to Miss B. about this. I don't remember but I expect I avoided eye contact if I passed her in the school hallways, a little ashamed of myself. And then at the end of that year she left our school. Was there a

connection to the events of that day? I don't know.  
Probably not.

And I didn't see Miss B. again -- for half a century.  
Our high school reunion. And suddenly there she was.  
Amidst the crowded jumble of old, barely recognizable faces  
and clamor of conversation, I wasn't quite sure how to  
broach the subject, what to say. I suddenly felt a bit  
foolish. I didn't want her to think that this has haunted  
me, that I've obsessed about it for all these years. I  
don't know if she even remembers that sleepy Latin class so  
long ago, when a small girl stood tall -- and no one stood  
to support her. So I let the moment pass.

But really, what I should have said -- even 50 years  
late - is pretty simple. So I'll say it now.

"Miss B., I'm sorry. I should have stood up."

And maybe I'll send her a copy of this issue of  
Profile. I wonder what she'll say. She probably won't like  
being referred to as a "petite girl."

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*Doug Bowie is a playwright and screenwriter who lives (and  
reminisces) in Kingston.*

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