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Twenty-five years is nothing among brothers

Story by Christopher Phillips '81

A message from a long-lost fraternity brother launched Christopher Phillips '81, a professor of history at the University of Cincinnati, on an uncertain journey into his own past — and sparked the realization that you really can go home again. His essay follows:



The men of Theta Chi, circa 1980. “Being Greek only enhanced the sense of community” at Illinois Wesleyan, Phillips writes. “Every house was our house.”

The e-mail came innocently enough. Was I, with the inclusion of a nearly forgotten nickname, that person from IWU? Sitting in my third-floor office, overlooking my university’s quad, blushing with its first spring colors, I was blandly yet dutifully reading over lecture notes that I would stand and deliver yet again in a hour or so in hopes that my students could not tell that while history doesn’t repeat itself, historians do. Instantly, I was looking out on yet another university quad, much smaller, distant in both time and space, one where there was no Internet or even a desktop PC. Not then. But this imagery was now as clear to me as if it lay right

outside the open east window of the *Wesleyana* office, beckoning across my editor’s desk. I couldn’t distinguish by my racing heart, for it too was remembering.

The springs came slower, I think, to Central Illinois in the late 1970s. The winters were harsher and longer than now, especially when crunching through the morning dark the four blocks to campus from the Theta Chi house at 814 North Main in Bloomington. For a green kid from a small town, never having once moved in my entire life prior to the hour-and 45-minute trip there with my parents, it might as well have been Chicago. And the 1,600 students then attending, a far larger population than of my entire hometown, might well have been the 38,000 I see on the campus where I now teach. Where most undergraduates at such large public universities develop few, selective relationships with other students, the experience at IWU was improbably different. More intimate, satisfying, and at once more far-flung. We knew so many others, and knew them well. Being Greek only enhanced the sense of community. Every house was our house. Well, maybe except for a couple. But I’d lost touch with all but one of them. And it wasn’t him.

He had been a groomsman in my wedding, a friend whose dry wit and casual ease with others I envied but couldn’t emulate. A piper, and I was one of the piped. The life of every party, and there was plenty of living. Everything I wasn’t. But my memories of him, of us, were now blurred. Was the last time I saw him at that party when we met Tom Cross’s new wife from Alabama, then a world away, or was it the trip in the rented van with a rented keg to St. Louis, appropriately to Busch Stadium, to see the Cubs sweep the Cards? In either case, it had been

more than 20 years ago. Twenty years to grow up. Twenty years of life lived, not always to its fullest, as seemed those salad days when we were green in judgment. Twenty years to lose touch. Twenty years to become someone else, somewhere else. What could he want after all this time? Who was he now? Maybe I was most concerned with who he thought I was. No, I hesitated largely because I wondered who I thought I was now. And I wasn't the person of the nickname he used. Or was I? Going home again has its dark side, Thomas Wolfe warned. You'll never be anything more than you were then. And back then, I was him. A Dan Fogelberg lyric of the day pounded in my head. "Just for a moment I was back at school. Felt that old familiar pain." Not pain, really. Well, some pain, but not of his making. Only of mine.

I clacked a response. Brief, friendly yet reserved. And calculated. "I was," meaning the person of the nickname. "How are Jean and the twins?" I hadn't attended his wedding, although I couldn't remember why. I recalled hearing from others about the birth of his kids, that I was glad it was him and not me at the time, graduate school and an unfinished doctoral dissertation then swallowing me whole. Put the finger on *Send* and left click. Strange, this cyberworld. Disembodied communication, at once comforting and nerve-wracking, safe and dangerous. Within five minutes, another message. "Phone number?" Wondering whether I could in fact screw up the famed 3 o'clock in the morning courage if he called, I gave it.

He called, that very afternoon. And we laughed. Not the awkward laughter of long-ago acquaintances trying to feel out what they once had in common, but the irrepressible laughter of old friends that wells up from deep places. Laughter that nourishes body and soul. Hungry laughter. "We're getting the band back together," an inside joke line stolen from the movie *The Blues Brothers*, set, appropriately, in Chicago exactly a quarter century ago. It was the 25th year since graduation, after all. He knew. Summer plans to come north? A research stay on the coast wouldn't oblige. Homecoming could work out. (I was a year behind, but his was the pack I ran with). Mark your calendar. Be there or be square. I thought, we'll see.

As summer gave way to autumn, e-mails began to filter through, not just from him, but from others. Many others. An energy emanated from them. Palpable excitement, manifested by cautiously slung cyber-insults that pointed to familiar wounds without opening them. The band back together? Improbable. A schedule formed, a far cry from the old days when organization was a sign of either weakness or, worse, enthusiasm. No rah-rahs allowed. Golf outing on Friday in Bloomington. Drinks at the Ramada Friday afternoon. Dinner and drinks at Central Station Friday night. Drinks at the old house, now a parking lot across from Mennonite Hospital, on Saturday morning. And a wholly new behavior now exhibited itself. A Web site with old pictures, a composite, a Dream Girl program, a blog? This was hyper-organization. Who had kept such treasures, and why, I wondered? Who would actually show up, what group dynamic would show out? No one was bailing, yet. Surely there would be an October surprise. We all lived together for just two years, I told myself. Only two years.

“If I should meet thee, After long years,” Byron wrote, “How should I greet thee? — With silence and tears.” The dour line, not his best, kept running through my head during the hours driven toward Bloomington, tires droning impatiently on interstate asphalt. I wasn’t good company, my family complained. Except for my thoughts. Don’t expect too much, I muttered. Much time has passed. We’re different people now. Yet I comforted myself with Whitman’s more elegant and hopeful words on the seamlessness of past and present: “What is it then between us? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? Whatever it is, it avails not, distance avails not, and place avails not.”



(From left) Bob Aucutt, Pete Rottman, Paul Nordstrom, John Griffin, and Bill Hatton, all Class of 1980, were among the 16 Theta Chi brothers who celebrated their pledgship during a 25th reunion in Bloomington.

Wordsmiths, these, but who was right? I was in uncharted waters. Would time and distance in fact avail, blanketing the room in an uncomfortable silence that was the sin tax for too-high expectations?

I felt like I was driving with my hair on fire, electrical surely, if my chattering knee was to be believed. What would they look like? What could we possibly say to one another? I dropped my bags in the hotel room, in a part of town I didn’t now recognize, and pulled on a sweater. I found a stranger staring at me from the mirror. Or maybe a shadow of former days. A wider shadow. Lines on my face jumped out that were unnoticed a moment before; hair that was there only that morning was now gone. This, I said, is who they will see. I took a deep breath and headed for the bar.

I found there no strangers. Only friends. Sixteen of them. All but four made it. As each man rose to greet me and shake my hand, and I theirs, their eyes effortlessly warm with welcome, all doubts melted like those years-ago April snowfalls on the small university quad lying a couple of miles away. Sixteen times 20 years, and the burdens of life lived during, had whitened hair or drove it to extinction, widened waistlines, narrowed shoulders, and carved craggy lines into once innocent faces. But each man was there, whole and unchanged, myself included. No mirrors. I recognized them all instantly, and they me. Whitman was right. None of it availed.

By evening’s end, after liquor had loosened our tongues, we all laughed hungrily. Ravenously. Maybe too much so. The next morning’s drink was coffee, capitulation to a score years of hard-won wisdom undone by an evening of auld lang syne. At the site where our bond was cemented all those years ago, as Fogelberg’s song goes, “We drank a toast to innocence, we drank a toast to time.” Time that availed not. Maybe that he of the nickname was in fact good enough, then and now.

It occurred to me as I eased the van eastward onto I-74, a better traveling companion to my chattering family than on our trip there, that our pledgeship had not in fact ended all those years ago. We kept our covenant. In fact, three. One to the long-gone house and more loosely to the fraternity brotherhood, both of which we toasted. A second to the university that brought us all to this place at the same time and, improbably, kept us all there to graduation. And the last, the most important, was to each other. Not as boys in burlap shorts, but as men. None of these pledges mattered without the others. Two years had become a lifetime.

Incidentally, we did it all again 10 months later. This time, in sweltering Chicago, 20 showed up. And the Cubs beat the Cards again. Our luck continues. As surely does our pledgeship.