

Anniversary Report

*Reflections on a college
reunion not attended*

Michael Milburn

And did you get what you wanted
from this life, even so?

—Raymond Carver, “Late Fragment”

In the early 1980s my wife Mary and I, both of us aspiring

poets, lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I worked in a small library and Mary organized trade shows for a computer company. One of Mary’s colleagues, David, an expert in computer networks, prized her marketing skills, and when he left to start his own consulting firm, he hired her. David and his wife Susan soon began to invite us to their house for dinner; they spent most of their time around businesspeople and were intrigued by Mary’s and my literary pursuits. While it was easier to talk about writing than about David’s arcane computer work, I soon gathered that his skills were in demand. Mary told me of sending out invoices charging as much for a three-day consultation as I made in a year at the library.

David and Susan owned a penthouse condominium off Harvard Street, just a block from the Harvard Union, where he and I had eaten our meals as freshmen. It was at Harvard that David began to explore his interest in computers, then a nascent field, while I took a writing course that sparked my love of poetry. As I sat in his and Susan’s expensively furnished living room, sharing my experiences of trying to get published, I was struck by how our lives had diverged since college. Whereas David’s gift for computers had become staggeringly lucrative, mine for poetry would never provide me with enough to live on. I tried to imagine our lives with our circumstances reversed: poetry the hot new industry and computer science the labor of love. On days when I spent hours folding copies of my poems to send to literary magazines—most of which, I knew, would return them with rejection slips—I couldn’t see David performing a task that promised as little spiritual or monetary reward. Although

he took a flattering interest in Mary's and my writing, I felt that he looked upon us as curiosities.

Our differences led me to reflect on the nature of success. How much of it was due to temperament, talent, chance, or simply one's definition of the term? The notion was complicated by my affluent background, as I inherited material circumstances that many people hoping to be successful would aspire to. Even in my youth, when I was simply conforming to my parents' lives—swimming in the family pool, matriculating at prep school—most observers would have envied my situation. I had done nothing in my life except to be born and cooperate with adults, yet I already had a head start in the race to prosperity.

Maybe that's why I gravitated toward poetry. It seemed like a humble pursuit—though not, I hoped, self-consciously humble, as when a rich kid chooses to work construction—and my success as a poet would depend on me alone. My father might have helped to win me admittance to a good law school or country club, but held no sway over the poetry editor of the *Indiana Review*. Even here, though, the cushion of family money ensured that I would never become penniless or have to take a more demanding job to survive. The funds that provided this cushion were neither extravagant nor unlimited—if I had wanted a summer house or luxury car I would have had to choose more profitable and time-consuming employment. But such tokens of wealth had made me uncomfortable as a child, having nothing to do with my own accomplishments.

My background fascinated David. In my experience, the people most curious about inherited money are the ones concerned with acquiring wealth on their own. They wonder how families with old money live, as if seeking an example for how they should live so as not to appear unsophisticated. Sometimes their interest masks envy or resentment, as if they want to clarify that they are working for their advantage and I am not (though I never need reminding of that). They press me with questions about how many servants worked in my parents' house, or ask why I go to cheap restaurants

when I could afford fancy ones. David often grilled me about my upbringing like an anthropologist interviewing a member of a newly discovered tribe. But I had my own burning interest in his life, about which he appeared to lack any curiosity. His questions revealed a concern with how to adapt to success, not any desire to analyze it.

Eventually, Mary found the computer business too stressful and took a job teaching writing in Syracuse, New York. Soon after the move, she and I divorced. Periodically, Mary heard from David and Susan that they were still together and happy, and that the consulting business continued to thrive. I endured my own struggles with envy. David seemed to have achieved both personal and professional success while I, in my mid-thirties, had a failed marriage and (since relocating to Syracuse) a low-paying teaching job that offered no health insurance. My poetry satisfied me, but it was not remunerative or in demand by anyone outside a very small circle of family and friends. My only tangible success, and it was a strong one, was the son that Mary and I had before we left Boston.

In my twenties, success was something to look forward to: tenured teaching jobs, loyal publishers, a stable family. In my thirties, I began to feel impatient for these rewards, and uneasy that my efforts to attain them had fallen short. I didn't think then that they were out of reach, just that I was ready to look at my life in terms of accomplishment as well as potential. As I aspired to more immediate satisfaction in the years after the move, David remained a point of reference for my frequent self-appraisals. In my late forties, I found myself beginning to look backward, a shift precipitated by my twenty-fifth college reunion.

I had grown accustomed to names familiar from my college classes appearing as by-lines in *The New York Times*, or in articles from the business, political, or arts sections of that newspaper. But I never considered attending Harvard's alumni celebrations in Cambridge. I had worked at the university for ten years after graduation and grown sick of the place, so the prospect of revisiting the skinny

streets, spires, and river views did not hold the same charm for me as for my long-absent classmates. Instead, my reunion took place within a thick crimson hardbound volume that arrived at my house in May.

Having compared my life to David's up to that point, I now had an abundance of new models to consult: At 1,300 pages, the reunion book contains entries from just over half of the Class of 1979. These entries describe myriad sentiments and experiences, including joy, tragedy, illness, healing, ambition, self-destruction, and good and bad luck. A few entries, like mine, merely give an address. But others offer detailed résumés, family information, a recent photo to pair with the one from the 1975 freshman facebook, and lengthy essays. For the authors of these essays Harvard remains a significant touchstone, as it does for me. These grateful alums were active in college life as undergraduates and now work in professions—law, medicine, business, academia—that prize a Harvard degree.

These are people whose lives have apparently turned out well. Not all of the contributors acquired money or prestige, or enjoy stable family lives. Nevertheless, one can't read far without encountering not just one success story, but page after page of them. Among my classmates are a software executive, a venture capitalist, a company president, and a nuclear pharmacist. There are doctors and lawyers, managers and consultants, professors across several disciplines. The Class of 1979 also includes writers and teachers, many of them with credentials far more prestigious than mine. Stories of prosperity and contentment dominate; not a single graduate confesses to being involuntarily unemployed. The happiest of my classmates cherish their roles within a tradition. They define themselves in terms of their attendance at Harvard and seem to cultivate this connection more fiercely as their graduation day recedes, having used Harvard as a springboard to vocations that capitalize on its instruction, prestige, or both.

My artist classmates, who I had expected to be philosophical about success, disappointed me. Few had grown rich from their

painting, writing, or musicianship, but several had won recognition and even fame. Having always thought of insecurity as an unavoidable, even healthy trait for an artist, I was struck by their satisfaction with their careers. One woman, who began a painting career soon after graduation, listed a twenty-year run of grants and exhibits, one affirmation after another. I wouldn't have thought that a career that began with a graduate—even a Harvard graduate—moving to New York City to paint could turn out so well. Like her classmates in other fields, this woman exhibited no self-doubt about her rewards. Neither did the man who left his law practice to write. The language he uses to relate his feats brims with confidence. He quickly published an acclaimed memoir and saw his subsequent book made into a Hollywood film. Turning his hand to documentary filmmaking, he produced a dozen films, including a feature for HBO. He also recently revived his interest in music and performed on television with two world-famous accompanists.

The extravagance of my classmates' professional achievements did not surprise me. I was less prepared for their personal success. Family stability was also the rule rather than the exception. Twenty consecutive entries contained nineteen marriages, all reported to be secure, with an average length of eleven years. Divorces were infrequent and when they happened, happy remarriages often followed. Many wrote contentedly about their enduring love for their spouses and joy in watching their children grow. Reflecting on the emotional wounds and detours of my own life since Harvard, including my geographical distance from my son and my second divorce, I was amazed that twenty-five years could pass so smoothly for anyone.

The individual achievers' domination of the report left a struggler like myself feeling like an aberration, a blemish on the prosperous face of the class. Perhaps in consolation, I assumed that many of the book's cursory entries—no more than a name and an address—represented people like me who chose not to publish their mistakes and regrets. I briefly even contemplated an anti-reunion book featuring these sad tales to comfort those of us who had not fulfilled the

promise of our Harvard admission. Like an ambivalent guest at one of the reunion events in Cambridge, circling the tent with his cocktail, I then took to touring the book in search of approachable faces. A few anomalies appeared—the Jesuit monk, the South American expatriate who alluded to underworld ties. There was the handful of divorcees, a surprising number of widows and widowers, a veteran schoolteacher who wondered (self-righteously, I thought) whether his wealthier classmates had remained as true to their ideals as he had. Encountering a man who had left his medical practice to sell solar homes and a woman who had finalized her long-contested divorce the morning she wrote her entry, I thought, *Good for you*, with an enthusiasm I could not muster for classmates crowing about more spectacular achievements.

I didn't want to romanticize hardship or iconoclasm, yet these lives allowed me to look beyond obvious elements of success that I did not possess—the perfect job, the perfect marriage—to see what other criteria I might use in assessing my own life. The divorcee sounded as if she had finally overcome her failed marriage, which surely takes as much character as sustaining a good one. The ex-doctor had chosen to sacrifice prestige and income in order to improve the environment. In my eyes, his decision—made several years before global warming began to dominate the news—gave him a glamor as attractive as any surgeon's. In an age of SUVs and McMansions, the marketing of solar houses must have required as much ingenuity as medicine. The fact that these people demonstrated inner strength and passion in correcting their courses appealed to me. In the social milieu that I grew up in, such qualities were often overlooked during discussions of one's future.

I bear my Harvard degree like an inherited title: impressive but irrelevant to my actual accomplishments. Perhaps I am just as preoccupied with my college years as my more prestigious classmates, but my interest is less logical and, oddly, mixed with apathy. As an undergraduate I made few friends and engaged in no extracurricular

activities other than freshman sports. After twenty-five years of laboring in literature's least marketable genres, poetry and the essay, I have little to boast about in the company of my Harvard classmates besides their company itself. My life has turned out—well, I'm still figuring it out. My ninth-grade students praise my classes, but this improves neither the status nor the income of my teaching job, and my pupils rarely express interest in where I attended college.

I worried that any skepticism I felt about my classmates' thriving, satisfying careers arose from envy. Their work was going a lot better than mine. By the time of our twenty-five-year reunion, so many unpublished poems had piled up on my desk that it seemed pointless to keep adding to the glut. I had published a book of essays, after a demoralizing three-year wait during which the small press that had contracted to publish it settled a lawsuit. Holding an advance copy of the collection, which had taken eleven years to compile, I felt daunted by the prospect of starting a new one—not because of the length or difficulty of the process, but because the risk of failure and repeating myself seemed so great. I couldn't conceive of consecutive grants or guaranteed publication: I had toiled and pined unsuccessfully for such rewards for so long that the struggle had become an indispensable part of my motivation.

I admired my artist classmates' accomplishments and understood their gratification, but I couldn't bring myself to trust it. Their lack of introspection reminded me of someone who finds money on the street and declines to investigate in case he might have to give it back. The probing for deeper truths, meanwhile, seemed to occur among my classmates who had experienced setbacks or failure. The father who had coped for years with his children's poor health, the woman emerging from a divorce—these people reflected on both hardship and success, and always saw the latter in relation to the former. I don't think I respected them solely out of pity or empathy or because they eased my feelings, strange as it may sound, of being an outsider. I responded to glimmers of introspection from the others as well, such as the investment banker who, after twenty-five

years of a grueling work schedule, wondered whether he had given enough time to his family.

I don't believe that self-examination would have made the hard-charging, conventionally successful professionals any happier; it might have held them back. Introspection tends to feed my insecurity, sapping my initiative and hindering accomplishment. Still, it remains a trait that I value, even as it engenders ambiguity, ambivalence, and sometimes sadness. I have always regretted that my marriages did not work out, and always lusted after literary recognition. At the same time, being a single father who only sees my son on weekends and school vacations has probably made me treasure fatherhood more than I would have if my son lived with me rather than with his mother. Literary obscurity may often have made me miserable, but it has also made me less satisfied with my work and thus more like the kind of writer I want to be. Regardless of how my career turns out, I would rather look back on it with the perspective of T.S. Eliot, who professed to have no confidence in the lastingness of his poetry, than that of my classmates who appear to believe the judgments of those who praise them. I don't equate failure or self-doubt with success, but I do consider triumph over these to be a precious kind of success, one that requires self-awareness and appreciativeness. The fact that it owes more to character than to luck, talent, or public opinion makes it more worthwhile to its subject and easier for others to identify with.

In their book *Just Enough: Tools for Creating Success in Your Work and Life*, Laura Nash and Howard Stevenson, two Harvard Business School researchers, criticize the notion of success as a mere tally of wealth and status. They recommend measured and equal accomplishment in four areas: happiness, achievement, significance, and legacy. According to this model, many of my classmates reached their twenty-fifth reunions rich in achievement—primarily money and prestige—but impoverished in one or more of the other categories. The driven but conscience-stricken investment banker could

have put in fewer hours at work, still made a comfortable living, and been happier spending more time with his family. He could also have enhanced his work's significance by doing something in addition to his mercenary job and left a positive legacy by, say, starting a scholarship program in his firm or community. His achievement, as defined by the book's authors, would decrease, but his level of general success would rise.

A broader definition of success demands more than the glamorous job and stable family that so many of my classmates reported. It values a success that grows slowly and inconspicuously, and that one often achieves by responding to a need rather than by trying to advance one's career. The authors of *Just Enough*, who base their theory primarily on interviews with corporate executives, also discovered that

every one of the enduring successes showed resilience. None had escaped setbacks or defeats in their lives, and many felt that those moments were the ones they learned the most from.... A key factor relevant to our model is the ability to look at the entire picture of your success and that of others.

Published in 2004, the Class of 1979's anniversary report predates the current economic downturn, which has no doubt dimmed the outlooks of my classmates who have lost jobs or seen their retirement funds diminish. I'm curious as to how these graduates, who came of age in prosperous times, will frame their setbacks in future updates. Certainly the number of them in a position to create success out of failure, and reassess their definitions of those words, has increased.

Were my classmates who regularly confronted failure, both through grappling with crises and through work that offered little financial reward, better able to look at the entire picture of their success and that of others? Some of the artists fell into this category—not those with the literary, musical, or dramatic Midas touch,

but the ones who persevered in the face of minimal or no recognition. One acquaintance, with whom I had taken poetry classes and who later worked in a small-town library, kept writing after college. Though he had yet to publish his poetry, he included in his reunion entry a poem of his own that articulated his perspective on his life and the past quarter century. He was not polishing an armor of conspicuous accomplishment, but reporting from the front lines of struggle, where success is elusive and relative, rather than a way of life.

I respect vocations such as poetry for their resistance to self-perpetuating, snowballing success; every poem requires a new appeal to inspiration and to readers. My upbringing and education promised the opposite: a long-term contract with positive reinforcement. As undergraduates, many of my classmates envisioned a life of steady reward and advancement, and their reunion entries bear out their optimism. One pre-med acquaintance who used to pore over his chemistry textbook during meals is now a Stanford cardiologist; the dapper Groton graduate who carried a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* under his arm lists a Wall Street business address. At the time, those fellow twenty-year-olds mapping their futures looked practical to me, reproaches to my vague plan to write and figure out my livelihood when the need arose. Now I find it harder to admire someone who lacks introspection and some burden of disappointment.

The September 11 terrorist attacks prompted some of my reunion classmates to place their accomplishments in perspective. In contrast, those other entries that flaunt credentials sound arrogant. One architect embellishes the list of buildings he has designed with breathless adjectives: “prominent,” “important,” “noteworthy,” “monumental,” “notable,” “well-known.” *What next?* I want to ask. In the wake of such accomplishment and gratification at forty-six, how does one approach the future?

I should pose this question to David. According to his website, he retired from business at age fifty-five. I wonder if he ever stumbled

or came to examine his own life as avidly as he once examined mine. I like to imagine him undertaking a new vocation, one in which his passion outstrips his talent. “He who strives on and lives to strive / Can earn redemption still,” the angel says at the end of Goethe’s *Faust*. Even in failing he would succeed.