



When We Were Beautiful

What photos of our younger selves eternally portray.

I have noticed a trend: 50- and 60-year-olds using pictures of themselves from their college days as their profile photos on Facebook.

No doubt this is due in part to technological advances. Suddenly everyone is a digital photo editor. We can scan or snap new pictures of old prints and then, using Photoshop or Picasa or the software that came with our cameras, bring back to life the photos that used to be sealed forever in gold-plated frames on the mantel or glued to the pages of an old photo album.

But beyond the fact that our photographic archives have suddenly become uploadable, there is another, more obvious reason we do this: because the pictures are freakin' beautiful. Because we, at that particular moment in our lives, were gorgeous. Let's not beat around the bush. We were knockouts. No wonder we post those pictures. I'm not saying every student in every graduating class was a runway model. I mean that, across the course of our lives, most of us during our days on campus looked the most wonderful we ever would.

Our eyes were big and alive. We had no frown lines or forehead creases, decades before Botox. Our teeth were naturally white. Our hair was abundant and lustrous. Our body parts rode high in the carriage. Our complexions were not perfect, what with midterms and finals, but we were robust and healthy. Our body mass index was as optimal as it was ever going to be.

And then one day, as I did recently, you catch yourself in a mirror and ask yourself, "Who the hell is that?" Or, "What is my dad doing out of the cemetery?"

But what I think is happening with this trend on Facebook is not merely vanity. The Internet is crawling with liars and deluders, and here and there are people who are trying to fool themselves, and others, that they are younger than they are. But I suspect something less reprehensible is going on with these Facebook photos.

I think that, as we grow older and grayer, we start to fall in love a bit with ourselves when we were younger. Not like a weird crush, but "in love" in the sense of approving of who we were, admiring ourselves back in the days when we didn't know nuttin' but were so full of spirit and expectation.

In our 30s and 40s, there is a tendency to think the people we were in our college days is something to put behind us. Our youth and inexperience embarrass us. But as we get older, a kind of forgiveness sets in and we reach back and embrace those old,

young selves. They were in some ways the best part of us—willing to start at the bottom and work our way up. There was courage and character in that—a game attitude that seemed to say, “Let’s see what we can do with our lives.” And we can see that determination in the pictures.

Posting those photos is a way for us to fly a flag to our own hopes and dreams, whatever may have become of them along life’s way.

When I was young, I remember looking at photos of my folks when they were newly married and thinking, “Holy cow! What happened to them?”

Of course, the short answer to what aged my parents was me. Kids take a toll. But still, the contrast was kind of horrific. As a stripling in high school I remember agreeing with my cohort that our generation would be different. We would have better science, and better vitamins, and better exercise regimens to keep us young. And, of course, we would clean the planet up by 1987.

Things didn’t work out quite that way. The Woodstock Generation, so sleek and so bell-bottomed, wound up giving the world the term *morbidly obese*.

It’s a matter of some disgrace for us, this aging business. I have a lovely friend my age who doesn’t go out so much anymore because she has an intention tremor, a movement disorder that gives her a wobbliness in the hands that she thinks makes her look old. At least she has a sense of humor about it. “Trust me, there’s nothing intentional about an intention tremor,” she says. She frequents a Web site for sufferers ruefully named *wemove.org*.

But in her Facebook photo, circa 1971, none of that matters. On a spring day Justine stands with the breeze in her hair, her graduation gown bunched under one arm. She is laughing and giving the world a power salute.

Another friend, Allan, has posted a black-and-white photo of himself taken in his dorm room around that same year. He is sitting backwards in a chair with his chin in his arms. His hair is like some haystack from a Monet, spilling over his forehead and shoulders. And his face is alive with fierceness, young cynicism, and good humor. Today, all that hair is archival. He remains a tough dude, but more like

Samuel than Samson.

I used to fasten on stories about how University of Minnesota research led to the medical and other technological breakthroughs that would give diabetes and all other diseases the heave-ho and save us from this process of slow oxidation. And truly, the health sciences have held up their end of the bargain. We are living longer and healthier, give or take a few body parts that seem determined to take early retirement.

But as I get older, I find myself intrigued less by the University as super-problem-solver and more as a teacher of how to appreciate the beauty of life despite all the problems that beset us.

I remember a proseminar on the literary elegy I took from professor of English Toni McNaron in 1971. Of all the classes I took at the University, I tracked the other students from this one most closely over the years—which is a bit ironic, given that elegies are poems of loss.

But what I remember most is that the class was about coming to a deeper understanding of death, a reverence even. Today I can see a half-dozen of my classmates from that class on Facebook—a couple have passed away—and several of them alternate their current-day snaps, all loaded down with life, with their genius faces from yesteryear.

I am looking at one picture in particular, from the ’70s. It is of a young woman and young man. They are framed against some kind of swirling texture that might be cirrus clouds. They are very handsome and appear to be in thrall to one another.

My wife and I keep it on our wall in our home in St. Paul. The “clouds” are a window pane at Elliott Hall, the psychology building on the East Bank of the U’s Minneapolis campus. We had known each other only a few months.

None of the fissures had formed; none of the failures and heartaches show up in the picture. But not a day goes by that Rachel and I don’t see it and are reminded of the wonder we felt in those days, to be alive and together, and the wonder we still feel. ■

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