

Not the AHP Conference

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I wasn't going to go. It was the same weekend as the AHP conference and I'd been looking forward to that. But my psychotherapist friend said I must — it would be interesting, and anyway she wouldn't go if I didn't. I hardly thought about it until a few days before when I began to feel sick and bad-tempered. Afterwards, though, we agreed that it had been very interesting indeed.

Sixty of us met at the school we had first come to as 11-year-olds in 1966. We shrieked 'How lovely to see you!' and 'You haven't changed at all!' and reminisced over lunch. All the time my memory was being tweaked — by a face, a gesture, an urge to speak to someone I hadn't thought of in years or sadness at someone not being there. The people I had admired for their glamour and cleverness I still admired, and they were still involved with each other. I re-experienced those feelings of exclusion and not being good enough from the vantage point of a 38-year-old who has grown to like herself and felt for my younger self overwhelmed by the intensity of those feelings.

I couldn't remember being particularly close to anyone at school. At the reunion I felt that I had had good relationships with quite a few people (the sense of connection was so strong when I saw them and talked with them) but that I hadn't allowed them to mean too much me. Seeing my old friends again, I acknowledged that they were important to me.

When I got home, I began to feel very sad. I cried a lot and went to bed. That night I dreamed that I had gone to see the current headmistress and explained to her that I had left school before A levels but that I would like to do them now if she would let me. I thought that I could probably fit my cello teaching into my free periods and that everything could be worked out. I did, in fact, leave school after a term in the sixth form, terrified by how difficult the work felt and unable to tell anyone. (I'm not sure how clearly I would have been heard: I had sailed through everything else.) In many ways it was a good time to move on. I had an enjoyable and productive time at college (I even got a couple of A levels) and never regretted leaving school. At the reunion, though, it became painfully clear that some people had really enjoyed their time in the sixth form and I felt that I might have missed out. It's only very recently that I've learned that it's all right to want two things, to choose one and regret the loss of the other. When I left school I couldn't do that: my decision had to be clear-cut. No regrets and no looking back. My dream with its undisguised longing to have it both ways made me laugh but I felt much, much better after it, light-hearted and able to move on.

I do wish that the AHP conference had been on a different weekend but I'm glad I went to the reunion. No workshops, but a lot of therapy.