

IS THERE LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL?



In your case, high school may have been a prom-queen dream or wallflower bummer, but either way, those years left an indelible stamp on who you are now. Don't worry, though—even if it was all agony and acne, you can overcome!

By Ralph Keyes

□ Somehow, years, even decades, after graduation, no categories for making sense of the world seem to improve on the ones we learned in high school. "She's still queen of the hop," we'll say, or "a real cheerleader type."

A vulgarian to Americans is one who uses "locker-room language."

Then there's that completely untranslatable concept, "high school mentality."

"He's got a high school mentality, know what I mean?"

Of course I know. "High school isn't a time and a place," the rock musician Frank Zappa said. "It's a state of mind."

Because our social standing as adults may never be defined so precisely as it was during adolescence, after graduation we often simply fall back on high school concepts to make sense of each other. Howard Cosell comes right into focus as an undersized kid hovering around the jocks, whimpering "Hey you guys," just as Don Meredith was clearly on the inside, yelling "Get lost!"

After completing *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman told reporters that his co-star Katharine Ross was the kind of girl who never paid attention to him in high school.

Asked her opinion of two fellow models (Cybill Shepherd and Cheryl Tiegs), Lauren Hutton called them "all-American cheerleaders" adding, "I was never able to make it as a cheerleader."

Our vocabulary relies on terms learned in hallways—"stuck up," for example, "pep rally," and "pretty as a prom queen." For such words to make any sense, we must have shared the experience in which they were born. And we have. Within this century, high school has become, perhaps, our most universal experience as Americans, one endured today by over 90 percent of the population. Thus, when Rhoda says, "My hands haven't sweated so much since I tried out for cheerleader," I know just what she means. I can feel the drops on my palms.

Long after the last strain of "Mood Indigo" at the prom (assuming we were there), it remains possible to perceive the world in terms of what men played high school football, which women led cheers, and who led a life of bitter rejection.

When given actual data we're delighted. What adult is beyond a lift upon hearing Ali MacGraw confess she never had a date during high school, or when finding out that the young Henry Kissinger is recalled by one classmate as "a little fatso"? Such information brings people into focus and can be an enormous comfort.

I'll show you what I mean. I'm going to list here, after extensive research, my best information about where a cross section of public personalities stood in high school. Some of this information is by self-report of those on the list. But since high school is right up there with sex and salary as a topic of candor, the information should not be considered as definitive. Perhaps I should also say that my listing is not to sneer, expose, or even chuckle knowingly—I'm too vulnerable about my own standing back then (not high enough).

Okay, here it is:

Jocks: Warren Beatty, Bill Blass, James Caan, Alice Cooper, James Dick-ey, Bill Graham, Dennis Hopper, Arthur Miller, Robert Redford, Jason Robards, John Wayne.

Cheerleaders: Ann-Margret, Dyan Cannon, Eydie Gormé, Patty Hearst, Vicky Lawrence, Eleanor McGovern, Cybill Shepherd, Dinah Shore, Carly Simon, Lily Tomlin, Raquel Welch.

Student Government: Warren Beatty, Johnny Carson, Peter Falk, Hugh Hefner, Bowie Kuhn, Ali MacGraw, Bette Midler, Ed Muskie, Pat Paulsen, Philip Roth, John Updike.

Thespians: David Carradine, Johnny Carson, John Denver, Kirk Douglas, Charlton Heston, Cliff Robertson, Katharine Ross, Naomi Sims, Robert Young.

Debate: Mia Farrow, Dennis Hopper, Art Linkletter, Eleanor McGovern, George McGovern, Richard Nixon, John Wayne, William Westmoreland.

Newspaper: Alice Cooper, Howard Cosell, Hugh Hefner, Ann Landers, Philip Roth, Jerry Rubin, John Updike, Abigail Van Buren, Kurt Vonnegut.

Yearbook: Steve Allen, Hugh Hefner.

Band: Jean Seberg, Frank Zappa.

Pep Club: Johnny Carson.

Honor Roll: Helen Gurley Brown, Betty Friedan, Henry Kissinger, Ann Landers, Art Linkletter, Shirley MacLaine, George McGovern, Eleanor McGovern, Rex Reed, Barbra Streisand, Abigail Van Buren.

Dis-Honor Roll: Woody Allen, H. R. Haldeman, Michael Landon, Arthur Miller, Gregory Peck, Burt Reynolds, Charles Schulz, O. J. Simpson, Gay Talese, Joseph Wambaugh.

Class Clown: Steve Allen, Johnny Carson, Dustin Hoffman, Bette Midler, Carrie Snodgrass, Jonathan Winters.

Hoody: Merle Haggard, George Lucas, Sal Mineo, Michael Parks, Elvis Presley, Robert Redford, O. J. Simpson, Rod Taylor, Hunter Thompson.

Wallflowers (self-described): Joan Baez, Erma Bombeck, Mia Farrow, Betty Friedan, Lauren Hutton, Ali MacGraw, Joan Rivers, Buffy St. Marie, Barbra Streisand.

Women Tall & Men Small: Woody Allen, Bea Arthur, Burt Bacharach, Dick Cavett, Lauren Hutton, George Lucas, Shirley MacLaine, Kim Novak, Paul Simon.

Miscellaneous: Wittiest: Bea Arthur; Best Eyes: Lauren Hutton; Biggest Grind: William Proxmire (also Most Energetic and Biggest Sponger); Most Attractive: Cybill Shepherd; Most Popular Boy: Walt Frazier (also Most Athletic).

Dropouts: Harry Belafonte, Cher Allman, James Garner, Gene Hackman, Merle Haggard, Dean Martin, Bill Mauldin, Elaine May, Rod McKuen, Steve McQueen, Al Pacino, Frank Sinatra.

Knowing what a person was like in high school can make, or seem to make, everything fall into place.

This is one of the reasons yearbooks have become a basic work of reference in American society. A staple of celebrity profiles is pictures and data from the subject's yearbook. When someone discovered that the inscription under Martha Mitchell's annual picture read:

I love its gentle warble
I love its gentle flow
I love to wind my tongue up
And I love to let it go

the press was delighted. Of course! That's it! We knew all along. And what better confirmation than a high school yearbook?

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High school is an enrolling experience in this society, and yearbooks are its register—an annotated list of those who belong. Marilyn Monroe, who did not graduate from high school and was sensitive about it, at age twenty-nine had a photographer shoot her portrait as it might have appeared in an annual.

To the casual eye, yearbooks may look only like a scrapbook of bad photographs and worse prose. This is misleading. What an annual resembles more is one's driver's license or Social Security card—a symbol of full participation in American society.

Except yearbooks are more indelible.

A Social Security card can be burned and a driver's license let expire. You can change your name, quit your job, leave your family, and flee to Samoa—but someone can always look up your yearbook. When a woman wrote Ann Landers, dismayed that her mother-in-law had passed away unphotographed, because she had been sensitive about a big nose, Ann said that was nonsense: "Have you thought about her high school yearbook?"

How good are high school annuals as predictors of destiny? They may have been right about Martha Mitchell's mouth, but Eydie Gormé's yearbook

emphasized her cheerleading, before adding, "sings a little, too." Dwight Eisenhower's high school annual predicted he would become a history professor at Yale, his brother Edgar a two-term president of the United States. Ed Muskie was also spotted as a future president by his yearbook, as was Mel Brooks.

The real question is not whether yearbooks predict well, but whether high school does. Since we do remember high school so vividly, and continue to deal with each other through its concepts—particularly status—the inevitable question follows: Are these concepts indelible, or can they be changed?

Need we be who we were in high school, or can we be different?

Is there life after high school?

The answer is yes.

Here's a nice example. President Harry S. Truman wore thick glasses as a boy, fled from fights, and was admittedly not very popular. Nor was he the best student in his class. This honor went to Charlie Ross, valedictorian of their class and editor of its yearbook. At graduation, Ross was given a big kiss by the students' favorite teacher, Miss Tillie Brown. Truman and his classmates protested this favoritism. Miss Tillie stood firm. When the rest of them earned a kiss, she said, they'd get one.

After becoming president of the United States more than four decades later, Harry Truman hired Charlie Ross as his press secretary. The first person they called to tell about it was Miss Tillie Brown. "How about that kiss I never got?" President Truman asked his old teacher. "Have I done something worthwhile enough to rate it now?"

Quite commonly those who are accomplished as adults point (and point often) to some adolescent humiliation that preceded their later triumph, and may have contributed to it. Actress Sandy Duncan says that being seventh out of six elected cheerleaders both crushed her and turned her attention to a career on stage. Before campaigning successfully for mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley talked in a speech about being defeated for president of his senior class, and said his adult political ambition could be traced from that defeat.

Without necessarily drawing such a direct connection, other adults we consider glamorous today often describe feeling just the opposite in high school. For example:

Isaac Hayes. At Memphis's Manassas High the singer remembers being "a perfect example of failure." Squeaky-voiced and shabbily dressed, Hayes says that girls gambled their status by being

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seen with him, while guys ridiculed his late-changing voice and called him a sissy. Only after his voice changed and he won a talent contest late in high school did today's singer feel anything other than rejected.

Lauren Hutton. A decade before she appeared on a record number of *Vogue* covers, model Lauren Hutton recalls being "extremely unpopular" in high school. Tall, small-busted, and with a funny gap between her teeth, Hutton says she learned by cunning to compensate for her lack of natural gifts. But she still refers regularly to not making cheerleader in high school, and the fact that her prom date had to be arranged by a teacher. Hutton also has described more than once the time her falsies were discovered by a classmate and shown around. Of her high school experience overall, Lauren Hutton says: "I really knew despair."

Dustin Hoffman. As a high school student in Los Angeles, Dustin Hoffman recalls being short of body and long of nose. He also had acne and braces. What he didn't have was hair on his chest. Relegated to playing class clown, Hoffman dreamed of being bigger, tougher, and better off with girls. He lifted weights to this end and fantasized a lot. But nothing worked. Today Hoff-

man dwells constantly on pains left over from high school. When his name began appearing on theater marquees, the movie star complained: "Why couldn't this have happened to me when I was sixteen and needed it?"

To our delighted surprise, things do change after high school.

I've heard any number of alternative suggestions to explain turnarounds after high school, theories based on everything from hormones to Jung. But no one seems quite sure why this should be. Dr. Jack Block, a psychologist specializing in human development, began his book *Lives Through Time*:

It is an instructive, somewhat wry experience to attend a high school reunion twenty years after one's graduation. . . . the formerly lissome and lithe may now be pudgy and stiff; the great adolescent dreams of glamour and omnipotence largely have been deflated by reality . . .

Although many friends from adolescence have become the kind of person implicitly anticipated long before, others have not. The class literary aesthete went into public-relations work. Why? The tense, big-boned, not really attractive girl at seventeen is now, two decades later, a sophisticated, intellectual, sex-radiating woman, while the classically pert and pretty cheerleader of yesteryear is several times divorced

and older, yet less changed than she should be. Why?

After looking at research bearing on this question, and talking with those who have studied it, an explanation suggests itself: Role reversal after high school has less to do with any change in personality than the simple change of environment.

Study after study has shown that there is seldom much difference in *behavior* between adolescence and adulthood. This finding has been reported often, and in no uncertain terms. A second look at one group of students thirteen years beyond high school reports their "remarkable persistence of personality trends." After fifteen years another study concluded: "A striking feature of this investigation was the evidence for the persistence of behavior patterns over a decade and a half." After analyzing data on a group observed from birth through late adulthood, Jack Block himself reported that their "unity or consistency of personality is compellingly apparent . . ."

This means that we're probably stuck for life with the behavior we displayed in high school. If chatty then, we'll most likely be talkative now. Self-assured as teens, we'll appear on top of things later. A study comparing one group of physically mature high school boys with another group who took longer to develop found that fifteen years later the first group still acted more sure of themselves, even though their physical advantage had declined over time.

For those who want life to be different after high school, this is discouraging news.

But here is encouraging news: although our *behavior* may not change after high school, the *setting* does. What succeeds in school won't work later on. Physical gifts, looks, a winning way, and an easy smile—except for the odd Paul Newman or Ann-Margret—such qualities won't get you two seconds on the evening news.

On the other hand, those qualities that can lose you status in high school—aggressiveness, imagination, and an independent turn of mind—may be just the qualities needed to make it in a larger setting where performance counts more than style. No study I've read, or researcher with whom I've talked, has found any correlation between high status in high school and later achievement as an adult.

To the contrary, one report on 351 graduates eight years later found no relationship whatever between success in high school and later vocational success. "The impact of an active social schedule in high school does not necessarily result in long-term gains," concluded this report. "Some of the high

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school wallflowers are now leading very active social lives, and some of the sociometric queens of the prom now have little social interaction outside their own family.

"A study of the twenty socially most popular and prominent members of the senior class," the report continued, "showed that this group did not maintain a relative advantage or success in either social or other areas of young-adult performance when compared with a matched group of socially nonprominent peers."

After following up on a group of high school graduates at age thirty, another researcher found that although "many of our most mature and competent adults had severely troubled and confusing childhoods and adolescences. . . . Many of our highly successful children and adolescents have failed to achieve their potential."

In other words, things do change after high school and roles can reverse—radically. This is not because the humans themselves change. Our basic personality is probably set long before high school. What does change is the context. What works in high school just won't work later on. And vice versa.

But all alone, in the middle of the night, we sometimes wonder. What

would it be like if I went back to high school today? Would anything have changed? Would I?

In her thirty-third year, after a decade of marriage, Lyn Tornabene let down her hair, bought some knee socks, made herself up artfully, and enrolled in high school. A confessed youth cultist, Tornabene later explained in *I Passed as a Teenager* that she thought it would be fun to go back, and perhaps revert to a more innocent time of life. She did.

Within days as a high school student the writer found herself frightened in the hallways, worried about making friends, shy with boys, intimidated by grown-ups, petrified about PE, scared she'd give the wrong answer in class, and cheating on tests so as not to get a bad grade.

"I could never have guessed that I would have moments of complete regression," reported Tornabene, "and that on some days I would feel about school that I had never left it at all."

"I didn't think about anything but girlfriends, teachers, classes, and, well, boys—or my lack of appeal to them. I was worrying about whether or not I was homely, and I was spending more hours than I care to enumerate staring in mirrors."

Tornabene, in other words, confirmed our worst fear about how much change

we might find by going back to high school: none whatsoever.

But listen to her conclusion. After ten weeks of reversion, Tornabene called her most valuable souvenir "the marked change in my attitude toward life. It's the pleasure I take in being myself—in being this adult. . . . Since my bizarre excursion into their world I have an acute sense of pleasure in being my own age. Not in looking it and not in feeling it, but in being it. I don't mind the gray in my hair anymore . . ."

"Be young again? Not on your life."

