

A FEW NOTES ABOUT CLASS NOTES

By Susannah Clark '84



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“Whatever you live is Life. That is something to remember when you meet the old classmate who says, ‘Well, now, on our last expedition up the Congo—’”

—Robert Penn Warren

How to explain the undeniable allure of class notes? They can, of course, be simplistic and farcical. They can make you feel profoundly inadequate, like when a classmate writes in about his or her third ascent of Everest—without oxygen—or when a photo reveals that you’re apparently the only one in your class who wasn’t invited to so-and-so’s wedding.

But speaking as someone who has kept up with her classmates and their various ascents for more than six years, I can vouch that class notes are oh, so much more than that. Somehow, beyond all the weddings and babies and promotions and travels, the sum is a whole lot greater than its parts. Nor am I alone in this feeling. “It’s rewarding to reconnect with friends and acquaintances to see what they’ve done with their talents and interests,” says Bart McGuire, correspondent for the class of ’59, “to sense how our shared experiences have shaped us, connected us or divided us.”

There is, of course, a grind to the job, but that appeals to my inner obsessive-compulsive. Very significant organizational skills are required to keep track of who wrote in when and what they said (and here I utter a little prayer of thanks for Microsoft Outlook). But what makes a good column is indeed an art, and every correspondent seems to have a slightly different take.

Correspondent Liz Anderson '89 says, “I think it’s disappointing when a column is merely a litany of the adventures of a columnist’s old Exeter social circle, or yet the latest quarterly update from the person who always answers any request for news, no matter how slight the change in his or her circumstances. A good column includes a variety of news from a variety of classmates from many walks of life. Hopefully, that includes news from people who haven’t written in in a while, and news from people who are doing unusual things.”

McGuire takes a different tack: “A good column, especially for older classes like mine, focuses on three to five classmates and helps to bring out their development in recent years (or even since graduation)—their interests and careers and goals, their passions, their ups and downs,” he says. “That may require several paragraphs per classmate, but in my view it’s well worth the effort because Exeter graduates tend to be interesting, intelligent, passionate and eager to contribute—to their families, their communities, the environment, the public weal. The raw materials for each classmate were often visible, if masked by our adolescence and insecurities, when we were at Exeter. A good column indicates how a few classmates have used and refined those raw

materials to shape their personalities and choose their activities.”

For correspondent Kelly Teevan '69, a good column includes “the voices of classmates, not mine. Lots of names, longer entries and no showing off. I like classmates reporting on classmates because they can give a point of view; they can tease each other. I try to avoid in-jokes and unshared PEA experiences. What I prefer are people’s thoughts, reflections, greetings or invitations, as opposed to news.”

I find it striking that Teevan is less concerned with actual news, because I am veering in a similar direction. What people *think* can be far more interesting than what they *do*. Another interesting discovery that comes with being class correspondent: people are not who we may have thought they were. We are, mercifully, well past the age when hormones clouded our views of each other. Part of high school is defining yourself, which, no matter how bright you may be, is often done by excluding or categorizing others. Class notes can help us see each distinct tree in the forest—similar in some ways, but nonetheless unique. Shane Kramer '92 says that the experience of serving as a class correspondent has “humanized people. School lumps everyone together, but now I get these individualized responses and realize I’m among people who are smart and interesting. It’s drawn me closer to many of them.”

Adds Teevan, “When I was at Exeter, I didn’t understand people or families, I didn’t know how to relate to people. I wouldn’t have thought that some big shot could actually be a good person. We did a lot of prejudging; now we get to do a little post-judging.”

The job has certainly made more of a philosopher out of me. I’ve gained a more global perspective of my life by watching us grow up together (well, maybe not all of us), observing the changes in the ways we view life and success and our priorities. The universality of life is deeply comforting, and at the same time the uniqueness of each individual road is also inspirational. As I grow older, I don’t feel the need to try to impress; I have the confidence to believe that I have something valuable to contribute regardless of how ordinary my life seems to be (the lessons of the Harkness table coming home to roost?). “Everyone has trouble; everyone suffers losses,” Teevan notes. “Through this, we help each other discover the truth about our own lives.”

In a way, I feel we are all brothers and sisters. We have a significant commonality in our past. We all went through something together that was difficult and formative, something that has shaped who we are today. My fervent, urgent and perhaps even futile wish for my days as correspondent, however long they last, is that I hear from everyone in my class. As hokey and ridiculous as it may seem, I really do want to know how everyone is, what everyone is thinking about, what everyone feels about what they’re doing today and how they lived at Exeter. Class notes should celebrate our selves, our connections, our thoughts, our attitudes and their evolution over time. We are all in this together, and we have a lot to learn from each other. Please write. We’d really love to hear from you. ●