

Beginnings: Schools represent a community's deepest values

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

I read over the articles in this issue on teenage spirituality while traveling to my high school reunion in western Pennsylvania. It was a happy coincidence, since a reunion offers a brief reentry to the world of teenage relationships. It is remarkable how the dynamics of personal relations reactivate after half a century.

Two of the classmates I met were friends from church, and part of what we reminisced about was Sunday school, youth fellowship, church basketball and the state of our old congregation.

It is great fun to reconnect with friends who were part of formative teen years, some of whom I hadn't seen since commencement day. We squinted at name tags through bifocals and told gentle untruths to one another: "You haven't changed a bit. . . . You look great. . . . I'd recognize you anywhere." We showed pictures of grandchildren, compared career notes and laughed about experiences we shared years ago.

Part of the burden of being a clergyman at a class reunion—in addition to encountering disbelief ("You're a minister? You gotta be kidding!")—is that you are invited to deliver the invocation at the banquet, and perhaps asked to offer some reflections.

It was an opportunity for me to express gratitude for the people who are so significant in one's growth as a person. The importance of teachers, advisers, coaches and mentors has become more evident over the years. For me the list includes the intimidating Latin teacher who scared us to death and taught us how to work hard, the English teacher who introduced me to the power of a novel to evoke deep feeling, the band director who taught me the beauty of making music, the coach who insisted that there was more inside us and convinced us to give it. I asked everyone else to name the persons who made their list.

It was also an opportunity to reflect on the importance of the school in that blue-collar railroad town. John Updike says somewhere that public schools represent a community's most deeply held values and highest hopes, and that the grand old school buildings of the 19th century, with massive Greek columns and a dome visible all over town, made a statement about the importance of the enterprise that was happening inside. I was privileged to attend a school like that.

[Carol Lytch](#) and [Chanon Ross](#) remind us in their articles that we are formed, or not formed, by relationships and experiences in childhood and adolescence. Both affirm the key role played by congregations. My class reunion reminded me further of that. It also reminded me that public education has represented the best hopes of our culture, and that there is no public issue more important than providing such education, equitably and adequately, for all children.