

Notes on 1962 50th Reunion, by Elizabeth Adlum Mapes

Thursday reception in dorm and buffet supper

While some classmates had already been on campus for a few days, working hard to get things organized, this was really the “opener” for about 70 of us. Its excitement was felt even from our first moments walking into Buckland: immediately picking up the pleasures and quirks of friendships forged 50 years ago – and also starting easy conversations with classmates we’d never known before but who seemed like people we’d really enjoy now.

Ann Iselin Harwood’s catering was much appreciated, providing us with a delicious and relaxing buffet supper to share while we got reacquainted.

Gatherings were fluid, but to anyone moving around the room, it was apparent that in addition to catching up on our personal lives, we were quickly discussing more general topics: health care, the economy, politics. Some subjects regarding MHC came up spontaneously again and again.

We were almost universally delighted that the College has gone beyond its former almost lily-white, homogeneous past to become a leader in educating a multi-cultural student body. The interest of many of our classmates in the early civil rights movement was noted often.

In light of how conservative the College was in our day, some of us expressed surprise about the class survey: a large majority of us now label ourselves either radical or liberal. Were we closet liberals way back then, or have we changed in part because we experienced rules we considered rigid and hurtful? Discussion was enriched by the welcome return of classmates who originally dropped out because they felt uncomfortable or were forced to leave because of pregnancy or a desire to marry.

A surprising number of conversations focused in on complex personal reactions to President Gettell’s Uncommon Woman theme. It seemed to have been provoking insecurities, arousing both ambition and rage, and causing us to think critically about “mixed messages,” patronizing attitudes, and social inequities throughout our whole lives!

Inequities that existed, but usually were unacknowledged, at Mount Holyoke itself during our student days were frequently discussed, prompted in several conversations

by classmates who revealed that waitressing had been a particularly alienating experience for them. Not being able to dine with everyone else excluded them from what was a central community experience in our day. Many of us expressed the opinion that it's unfortunate that the College couldn't have eliminated waitressing while still retaining dormitory dining rooms.

None of these conversation were finished on Thursday. They were really just beginning, and their continuation was at the core of what made our reunion valuable all weekend long.

Class discussion of Half the Sky, by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn

Carolyn Lewis Richmond led our discussion, beginning by noting that we were likely to have had strong reactions to the book's portrayal of women's oppression throughout the developing world. That turned out to be true.

The first classmates who spoke told of feeling overwhelmingly depressed by the preponderance of horrific statistics about atrocities like genital mutilation, sex slavery, and maternal mortality. There were differences of opinion about whether the personal stories interspersed among the statistics and historical analysis served only to illustrate the horror, or whether they provided some keys to how to combat it.

It was then noted that, while most of the examples in the book are from developing countries, sexual oppression, indeed human rights violations of all kinds, do exist in the U.S. Several people gave examples from their own home towns.

How, then, should one think about solving such problems? U.S. government aid and N.G.O. protocols and pitfalls were discussed, but the group then moved toward Kristof and WuDunn's view that it's more effective to use grass-roots methods and local leaders. By the end of our session, there was greater agreement that the personal stories in the book really do show a way forward. Women in even the humblest circumstances have the desire and strength to better their lot. It's by finding savvy ways to help them help themselves that we can combat gender inequality.

Unfortunately, we ran out of time before we could discuss Kristof and WuDunn's suggestions in this regard.

Introduction to the Common Read: Half the Sky

This session beautifully complemented our own class discussion of Kristof and WuDunn's book. It was led by Rene Davis, MHC dean of students, and Leah Glasser, MHC dean of first-year studies.

Davis and Glasser began by explaining that the common read is an effort to engage all incoming students and their teachers in a collaborative scholarly analysis – simultaneously a bonding experience and a trial-run of the kind of thinking that they'll be doing during the next few years.

Half the Sky turned out to be the most controversial and, eventually, most successful common read. Initial criticism came from many sources, from incoming international students to senior professors, and it stemmed from feeling that the book so strongly focuses on women in developing cultures as victims that it is not a full view of those societies. In other words, this is a case where what is not in the book provokes as many questions as what is in it. According to Davis and Glasser, however, it is for precisely this reason that Half the Sky was so engaging and effective as a teaching tool. Everyone really wrestled critically with it.

Coming off the success of this effort, next year there will be increased efforts to include all students, not just newcomers, in the common read. The book will be Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake.

The Wendy Chronicles

The title of this student production is a take-off on Wendy Wasserstein's hit play, the Heidi Chronicles, inspired by her time at Mount Holyoke. Wasserstein's commencement speech to the class of 1990 provides a framework for scenes enacting Wasserstein's life during and after college. That notorious MHC fixation on the Uncommon Woman of course plays a role, as well as house mothers, but the play does not just go for easy laughs. Material has been taken from Wasserstein's personal letters as well as published work to create an engrossing picture of her personality and how she developed as an artist. It succeeds in making a serious attempt to understand Wasserstein's character.

As an aside, I can recommend Julie Salamon's excellent new biography, Wendy and the Lost Boys, where you can read more about many of the details mentioned so fleetingly in the play.

Canoe-sing

The College website shows President Pasquarella at Commencement, joking about how she lost her voice while celebrating at the seniors' canoe-sing party.

I really enjoyed it myself, viewing first from the quieter end of Lower Lake, on the bridge going up to the Mandelles, and then walking around to Prospect and the party. What struck me was that tradition remained, in the scenic maneuvers and in some of the songs, like the alma mater, but that the event had been clearly updated! Music was key - amplified, and including recent gay/lesbian hits. I'd be interested if anyone was more disturbed by the changes than I was. I don't remember that we had a party at all, though it now strikes me as a natural occasion for one. The students and parents were certainly having a great time!