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Stuart Vyse: A mere 'So long, see you tomorrow' might've helped

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By Stuart Vyse



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I recently met up with an old friend, and we reminisced about our high-school days 40 years ago. It was fun to share those memories with him, but I was also filled with a sense of regret about some of the things we did.

All high schools have their pariahs, whose function it is to protect the honor of those who cannot achieve status by any other means. When all else fails, denigrating the lowest of the low separates you from them. Looking back, two cases stand out for me.

One was a willowy girl prone to long dresses and distant gazes. She had straight brown hair that ran down to the middle of her back, and she was naturally taciturn. Apparently friendless, she was often seen dancing in the park at lunch. In those days we were allowed to go outside during the lunch hour, though we were not supposed

to leave the school grounds. Some kids never returned, but school officials were willing to accept a small loss of inventory in the afternoon.

Across from school there was a small park, and in nice weather this girl could be seen swaying and bending alone in a manner that combined ballet movements with modern dance. She often appeared to be initiating a kind of communion with the trees, who, despite her invitations, did not join in.

During adolescence everyone is so worried about how their own behavior will be judged that anything unusual in others is quickly labeled aberrant. It is an age when the codes of social conduct are remarkably strict. Seen from a distance, this young girl's dances looked very strange to us, and she was immediately assigned to the school's unofficial loony bin.

Although we thought she was crazy, perhaps because she was a girl and most of my friends were boys who retained a shred of chivalry or who, like me, were afraid of the opposite sex, we did not subject her to overt teasing. We made fun of her behind her back, but we left her alone. The same could not be said of one boy I remember.

This young man was the unchallenged winner of the loser contest. He was a general law of social science: the one kid you could deride with impunity. It was safe to make fun of him at any time, even if he was standing right next to you. Why? Because he would take it. Despite being bigger than a number of us, he was so desperate to be included that he was willing to accept the job of verbal punching bag just to have a role.

Physical fights were rare at my high school, but there are different ways to get beaten up. This boy could take any number of verbal punches and keep coming back. Today this would be called bullying, but in those days it was called high school.

Looking back, I am convinced that the young dancer's only problem was being smarter and more creative than the rest of us. She probably felt somewhat alien in our world and responded by creating a different one in her imagination.

Today the victimized boy would have a label. He might be called cognitively disabled, or perhaps he would be diagnosed with one of the less severe forms of autism. I am not sure it would have made a difference to us. Had he been anointed with a condition — a syndrome with a textbook name — I suspect we might have acted the same way. Or worse.

Sometimes a sense of regret comes with age. The main character of William Maxwell's autobiographical novel, "So Long, See You Tomorrow," is a man who, as a child, withheld a simple act of kindness from a friend whose family had been shattered by tragedy and scandal. It was a moment in time when a small gesture might have been very important. A missed opportunity that remained a psychological burden long into adulthood.

Nothing can be taken back. Once done, an action cannot be undone. Often we do or say something without thinking, or in the heat of emotion, and we regret it almost immediately. But sometimes the longing for a different reality comes much later. Time passes; we gain a new appreciation of events; and we discover pieces of our past that we wish had gone differently.

Children act without the benefit of a wisdom that — if we are fortunate — comes later in life. Looking back, it seems fair to forgive our younger selves their youth. We were just kids. We didn't know what we were doing. It would be easy enough to let it pass. Yet some decisions — particularly those that touched other people — can

gnaw at you years later.

I wish I had reached out a bit more to these two fellow students. High school was not a great time for me. I have few happy memories of that period, and when senior year came around, I chose not to buy a copy of the yearbook. But I probably got through my high-school career in better shape than they did, and as a result, I had something I could have given them.

The saddest part is knowing — as I do now — that it might not have taken much effort. Sometimes just a simple thing, like turning to someone at the end of the day to say, “So long, see you tomorrow,” can make all the difference in the world.

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