

Voice in the Wilderness: The Class of '71

Fifty years ago this week, I graduated from high school. My four-hundred-something classmates sat in folding chairs on the football field, the stands filled with our parents and families, as classmates and various dignitaries read speeches designed to inspire us all to go out into the world and do great things. I remember it was dreadfully hot, and I couldn't wait to shed my cap and gown and head to the after-graduation party down at the river.

Eventually it came time to receive diplomas. When the time came – I was approximately two-thirds of the way through the roster alphabetically – I dutifully fell in line, marched up to the stage, received my sheepskin, and then marched back toward my seat.

The faculty was seated on the first several rows. As I marched past, Mrs. Norrick, seated on the end of a row, got my attention.

"Pssst....Randy."

She had been my English teacher on three occasions during my four semesters at F.J. Reitz High School. She was without question the toughest teacher I ever had. My grade point average and class rank would have been significantly higher, were it not for her. Still, I credit her for being the teacher who most challenged me. She forced me to raise my critical thinking, reading, and writing scores to the next level – which back then was a B-minus.

I stopped my walk momentarily and turned toward her. We had a brief conversation. (It had to be brief because a long line of people was marching behind me and I didn't want to gum things up.) In that brief exchange, she said something astounding: "You are the poet laureate of the Class of '71." Then she winked and I marched on.

It was not any kind of official conferral, and it was not an official title. I have never used this auspicious "title" to further my station in life or get discounts on coffee or hotel rooms. I rarely think about it. But sometimes it comes to mind, like this week when I decided to compose a song for my 50-year class reunion, slated for this fall. I got to thinking that Mrs. Norrick might have issued one last post-graduate assignment on that day, due on her desk exactly fifty years later. In that spirit, I accepted her conferral and her assignment.

As is my practice, I waited until the last minute, but I got 'er done, at least a first draft, and I rendered the words to music. That, folks, is the story behind the attached song, dedicated to my graduating class of 1971.

