

## An MIT Interlude

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They're there and you can't get away from them, those synaptic settings and molecular encodings right behind your eyes. They are the memories of MIT-past that come flooding back as we revisit the stomping ground of our tumultuous youth. For most of us they are now 25 to 29 years old, at least for those who didn't stay on at MIT or return as professors, flacks, or administrators. Nature arranged this miracle of memory and we're stuck with it.

We're back at the 'Tute and it isn't easy. We feel as if we've slipped into a space-time warp and are here again, but it is a strange new day. Here are the buildings we knew so well. But the Soviet Union is no more, Vietnam is a place for tourists, new businesses, and even John Denver concerts. China is our friend (sort of), and Europe looks like the onset of World War I revisited. And the Middle East? The war that erupted when we became MIT juniors is still going on—in the streets. Richard Nixon has lately left this mundane sphere, and someone looking vaguely like JFK sits in the White House. At least one of us once attended Wellesley classes with his wife—a veritable Ms. President for our matured Baby Boomer age.

In this new day there are no slide-rules and nearly everyone owns their own computer—sometimes two or three—each fantastically more quick-witted than an old IBM-360. You can put 'em in your briefcase and sometimes your pocket! Increasingly they understand speech and even hand writing.

Gone are black vinyl LPs. Music is mostly laser-driven now, and digital. People fax each other many times a day and talk on pocket phones. They converse and meet via globe-girdling e-mail. On the news you get moving pictures of the clouds over your head from high above you in space. TV is *live* from everywhere. Camcorders have made everyone a movie producer. Technology now limits the memories we *could* relive in vivid color and sound, only by the time left to relive them.

Rocket ships *fly* back from space, but where is the Moon base and the Mars colony that we were promised by now back in '69? God, 2001 is only seven years away and still no space station whirling to strains of the Blue Danube! Something must be dreadfully wrong with our time machine. Along the way in our time-travels we've heard of Watergate and Whitewater. What next? Of course—Heavy Watergate. Welcome to the "Cold Fusion" age, where either water *will* be the fuel of the future or much pie in the face—or both! As they once said after the discovery of some obscure elementary particle, "Who ordered *that*?"

Long hair (for men) is mostly gone. The MTV generation, our children, still does watch the long-hairs on the tube. Bell-bottoms are no more. Miniskirts and microskirts are out, though occasionally seen. Country music is in—and many of us like it in our approaching dotage.

Confronting our MIT memories is at once joyous and troubling. The smells, the sights, the sounds, and the geometries are roughly the same, despite the changes. Yes, the Coop is not where it's supposed to be, and you have to wade through a clothing store, the perfume counter, and lingerie, and then take an escalator to the basement to reach the books. But Building 20 is still there, its old dumpy self. Room 26-100 looks the same as when Professor French dished out holy writ according to Newton. Kresge and the Chapel haven't changed, but man, look what happened to Julie's building—the Student Center! It's been Malled!

The halls through which we rushed to class or walked to the LSC movies are a bit kinder and gentler—more colorful, to be sure—but you can still see plenty of battleship grey. There are now many more women and more minority students.

Look there—that's the place where your date fell down the worn steps and went to the infirmary. Over there, that's where you walked and daydreamed on a lazy Sunday afternoon when you should have been studying for a dreaded math final. Up there on the fourth floor of that building, that's where you got....whatever.

Our thoughts turn to that proud June day a quarter century ago. In June 1969, we were the elite 101st graduating class of MIT (or thereabouts)—airborne. We were the survivors of four years of rigorous learning and enormous personal growth. Little did we know then how incomplete we were and how *really* little we knew. There was much to grow and know and much more to learn. Now, far from our days of seeming immortality, we know the truth all too well. Because there isn't really *that* much time left, we will leave this world only barely having scratched the surface. That should *not* detract from the joy of scratching!

Though many of us may have become successful in one or more of life's dimensions, it wasn't an easy road to today. We careened off the highway now and again, but made it back. Some of us might thank the 'Tute for instilling in us the strength and discipline to return. Others might blame *her*—Is that 1994 "sexist"?—for having gotten us off the path in the first place. Damn you 'Tute! Why didn't you tell us it wasn't "plastics!", but biotechnology and software.

When we entered MIT on that brisk September day in '65 there were still a few people alive who could remember the Civil War first hand. Strange how close to and yet how distant from the past we were. The year Lincoln was shot was when MIT admitted its first students, and here we were 100 years later, also being admitted, less than two years after another presidential assassination. Since we think in base-10, that is of some significance—we were close enough to being the hundreth graduating class. More important, within weeks of our graduating, men of Earth first walked on the Moon. Twelve people would do so, and then it was over. We haven't gone back since then. This was bittersweet for we of '69 who were and are space cadets.

There were no future astronauts in our class, but many of us worked on the ground to help our expansion into space. Our years at MIT and the decades after would see every planet of the Solar System visited by a spacecraft—except Pluto. Some with a physics bent saw far beyond the rocky orbs near Sol; they became world-class cosmologists, probing the origins of time and space as they chronicled and spaced the galaxies.

Others explored the microcosm of particle physics, which turned out to be cosmology in disguise. Worlds within worlds, within worlds, within worlds...Computers have simulated it all. Is there nothing left sacred, untouched by electronic projection? Even life itself evolves today within silicon brains. Was life more or was it less exciting than when such instant mathematical gratification was impossible?

Not so many of you served in the military, but some did, and proudly. Some wanted to and couldn't. Some didn't want to but did. Some—I don't know how many, but I would like to know— went off to wars far away and never returned. Thank you all, from our Class and our country.

So many in our class became physicians, who perhaps never dreamt they would back in the days of problem sets done too far into the night to be safe—or right. There are an amazing number of attorneys too, or seem to be, as I have chronicled your comings and goings in the alumni/ae pages of TR. Some of you even wrote books. How many of us rose to the top of Great New Corporations! Some have founded new technologies of life and computation barely dreamed in the late '60s. Molecular confections and electronic confabulations, ad infinitum. Still, our greatest science has not dented the scourge of AIDS, and the plague fells victims in our Class and among friends and relatives.

One of us became an acclaimed actor of Hollywood fame. We even saw him on Saturday Night Live! Ah, but he didn't have *time* in those hectic days of the Steep Climb to reach Graduation Day. So what, Jim, you're still one of us! Yes, and we say that goes for the rest of you too, who for whatever reason fell by the way and didn't get your 'Tute Papers. You were part of us then and you will always be.

Now that we have scaled these peaks, we should all take ten, at this our twenty-fifth, to remember what life is really all about, way down deep at its roots. Many of us have learned that it isn't just about academic or business success or some other outwardly visible achievement—obviously, *intuitively obviously*. Yes, most of us got on that achievement kick in one way or another, because that's what the 'Tute taught us to do and we liked doing it or couldn't help ourselves

from the doing. We were selected for it and, by God, we *did it*, each in our own way.

We learned that life was and is about friends, love, and family, those priceless links we have with other human beings. We can't all boast to have been high-achievers in that department. Still, your messages through the years showed that those things mattered to you too, even though they had you pegged as a bunch of robotic nerds devoid of emotion.

Now we return to MIT older and a quarter-century wiser. This is no trick of time-travel, it's the real thing. Come on now, admit it! We haven't all returned here brimming with love and joy for the place, ready to donate generously to MIT 's war chest and vested interests. In fact, some of you have demonstrated in so many ways that you don't agree with everything that the "Tute has done or become. But more of you than not are still proudly waving the "red and gray" for all the world to see. The rest you secretly want to join in, but something holds you back.

We all have a bit of IHTFP in us and it's not that the Institute Doesn't Have the Finest Professors! It's a bit of an experiment, this coming back, which is testing those reactions to the old stomping ground. We are having mixed emotions. Is the place still good enough to command our respect? Do we really believe our own internal propoganda about MIT that we carried inside all these years? Will being here again severely test those illusions? How will we be received by other classmates? Will we have been "successful" enough, or will we perhaps seem "too successful"? Will we be exposed for what we are or aren't? Will our antique nerdiness peek through the cover of our modern suits?

No, MIT wasn't everything to us these past twenty-five, but it sure helped direct a good measure of our lives. You can't deny that. Otherwise, why would we be here or why would we even *think* of being here if we couldn't make it to Reunion 25? So, bowing to that, we allow this interlude— a mere weekend—and are swooped up in the vortex of the Institute once more. After a long and winding path, it's good to be home again.