

# **I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)**

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## **Future Me**

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## Future Me



*The end product of four years of high school. The hair is longer again. The suit and tie are of my choosing. (I really liked that tie. Not my taste now. Now, I own only one, a black knit.) The look is what we were supposed to look like as we confronted our future. I wonder if we practiced in the mirror? You can see I'm no longer the fatty of fourteen. The suit even hides a few muscles added since the last picture.*

We have all known people whose best times were their high school years. They knew who they were then, what the world was, and how they fit in. A world entirely

circumscribed by high school. Nostalgia for high school years can come from exalted positions like class president, head cheerleader, prom king or queen, or sports star. Nostalgia for high school, for most, is simply loss of classification, of certainty. Displaced from their demimonde, they feel adrift in the wider, more complex, outside world.

*Beyond high school, the solution for some is to seek standard roles. For many this means marriage and children. My guess is not every such choice for the wrong reasons fails, leads to divorce. But many do. I wonder how many stay too long in these jobs, situations, and relationships? They made their choices to fit in and now the fit is too tight.*

This, in many ways, is the opposite of what high school should provide. At the least, high school is supposed to help us focus on our future. From testing and grading to guidance counseling, the school system tries to perform this function. I know they tried for me. I know I tried to see my future through the haze of high school. Seeing one's future (or future potential to be more accurate) not only helps define who we are, it makes life easier if we think we know who we are. The more we know, the better we see; the better we see, the more we know.

I knew nothing. I was so bewildered by the present, I had little thought for the future. Like most adolescents, I was overwhelmed by information about myself, my sex, society, knowledge, and the world. Maybe I could have dealt with these—if girls hadn't clouded my mind. I saw little else, heard little else, thought of little else. Girls! What were they? Why was I bowled over by them? I was changing so fast, too many new pieces of data coming much too quickly. Unable to integrate new facts, the new me—re-emerging everyday—drifted though high school. The world outside seemed unconnected to high school. My academic interests never materialized. My social circle

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never expanded beyond my two friends. The opposite sex was moving further away in my expanding sexual universe. Who I was became less clear year by year.

The high school's tests for aptitude and interest were futile. One such test suggested I become an accountant. I imagined nothing more boring. (And nothing intellectually less rigorous. To this day, I believe all accounting methods are arbitrary.) Many people find direction for their future from that special teacher. In my entire academic career, I had only two teachers indicate any personal interest in me. (And then not until my second attempt at college.) With no help from the public school system, I had no vision for myself until halfway through my junior year.

*That's not quite true. I'm sure I wanted to be a soldier-sailor-cowboy-fireman when I was much younger. And when I was twelve, I became enamored of the idea of efficiency expert. An idea derived from Cheaper By The Dozen, a book about husband and wife efficiency experts Frank and Lillian Gilbreth and their twelve children. I was fascinated by their stories of how one could make one's life and work more efficient merely by a little study and thought. (None of this came across, as I recall, in the movie of the same name. It was merely a fluff piece about their large family.)*

It began with a magazine article. (I'm guessing *Colliers* here. I vividly remember their series on space exploration.) It showed new highway signs designed for readability. Perhaps there were also coffeemakers created for functionality and other such, but now I can't recall. What I do remember is the instant recognition: I could do this! Here was an interesting challenge, and it was in a brand new field called Human Engineering. (Later, it mutated into Industrial Engineering, Industrial Design, Ergonomics, and other specializations.)

I saw an opportunity to create things to improve our lives. What I didn't see was the underlying: This was about designing things better, making them easier for people to use. This would become the common thread of all my future occupational choices.

This vocational choice lasted only a month or so. The article said you needed a PhD to create these designs. Everyone I approached, those in positions of guidance, made it clear this degree was the minimum requirement. I couldn't see it. I was already finding many things I could design better. I understood the need for more technical education, but waiting years for a PhD before I could even begin? Not for me.

*I was to spend considerable time among PhD candidates while working for NYU in the sixties. Their studies encompassed familiar fields like economics, management, mathematics, and esoterica like magneto-thermodynamics. Here I could see the need for the added years. I could also see a certain addiction to education and a paralysis of action. I worried about how these people would cope with the real world. Most never did. They stayed in academia. Here's what Freeman Dyson said in the February, 1998 Wired:*

*"I would abolish the PhD system. The PhD system is the real root of the evil of academic snobbery. . . . It's a paper qualification that poisons the whole field."*

My next choice might seem predictable from many angles. My father and his four brothers were structural engineers. (Their one sister was a teacher.) I had seen blueprints for buildings since I was a small child. My interest in Human Engineering transformed itself into the design of buildings. And not just any buildings. Designing

houses for people became my goal. None of my father's blueprints were for houses. Some were for bridges, a subject far removed from my interests. But houses for people to live in, that was something *I* wanted to do.

I began by devouring books on Architecture. I even read Frank Lloyd Wright's autobiography. (It was out of print when I visited the gift shops at Oak Park and Taliesin this summer. But last week I saw it at the local mega-book store.) In art class—my one elective apart from the standard college prep program—I drew floor plans. Endlessly. Midway in my senior year, I produced a theme paper for English entitled, "Modern Architecture." It was a survey of the various modern schools from the well-known Wright and Mies to the lesser known like Pietro Belluschi. It was rejected out of hand, with an idiotic comment about how the material did not fit the title, ". . . as one was led to believe." I didn't understand that response then and, when I recently found this paper in my files and reread it, don't understand it now.

But I think I can explain it. (And why I never found favor with my teachers.) This particular English teacher probably did not like me. I was not an especially disruptive student, but there were those times when a joke couldn't be suppressed. I also had difficulty suppressing my slight regard for many of my teachers. We had one substitute Physics teacher who claimed rocket ships couldn't work in space because there was nothing to push against. Honestly.

Once, in an English class we examined our reading speed. I read the test text, looked around and saw everyone else still reading. So I read it again, carefully. I looked around. They were still at it, so I scanned the article making sure I was prepared to answer any questions. Then, bored, I stared out the window. When the teacher called time, she asked me if I had read the article. (I was, she noticed, staring out the window.) I replied, "Yes.

Twice.” (Thinking I could have said two and a half.) Not the kind of response endearing one to one’s supposed superiors.

Another time, a small group of us were called out of class for Naval ROTC scholarship exams. This was an ongoing process for a number of days, and we quickly adapted to being excused from class. (Did I see this free education in exchange for a naval career as one of my options? Hardly.) In this particular case, we were returned to class with only ten or so minutes remaining. The class I returned to was English. When I walked in, that same teacher handed me a test. The rest of the class had been working on this for forty minutes and, despite my protestations, she ordered me to sit down and take the test. I think it was on Hamlet. I passed.



*And for now for something a little less serious. This was a stop on the way to college. My parents drove me up to Troy, N.Y. , and stopped in Pittsfield, Mass. to visit my Mom’s friend. Her son brought out his latest toy. Mom on stilts. How uncharacteristic. Except for being a competent swimmer I don’t remember her as a very physical person. As for me, I’ve changed again. This is September and my hair is shorter.*

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