As Our Lives Change
by
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Graduation (Friends Forever) is the semi-rap medley of pop artist Vitamin C that fans will note enjoys serious air time beginning before May through the middle of June. The nostalgic, reflective nature of the song’s lyrics makes it easy to understand why its heightened play time logically coincides with the final flurry of senior banquets, proms and award ceremonies that culminate in yet another year of high school graduations. The words give voice to the questions, doubts and apprehensions that naturally arise as high school seniors are faced with the inevitable changes that must take place as they are forced from the security of their comfortable thirteen-year cocoon of public schooling. For those young people facing the fearful unknown, the final words of the song’s repeated chorus becomes a hopeful, albeit unrealistic mantra…”and as our lives change, come whatever, we will still be friends forever.”

The emotional highs and lows that typify those final nine months of our general education are ubiquitous for seniors across the country. Oddly enough these mood swings are reminiscent of the conflicting emotions witnessed thirteen years earlier on the faces of the moms and dads who with tears and half-hearted smiles, deposited their offspring in a classroom of strangers telling them what fun they’d have, and encouraging them to make lots of new friends. However, for most of these timid new students, the comfort they seek will come, not from any remarkable friendships forged in kindergarten, but from the predictable routine that repeats itself day after day, season by season. The start of class is signaled by the pledge to the flag and morning announcements. The final bell and instructions to get coats and hats lets students know it’s time to go home. Jack-o-lanterns in October will give way to turkeys in November which will be exchanged for Christmas trees and Santa Claus in December. There will be snowflakes
in January, hearts in February, shamrocks in March and so on, until we learn to march to a routine school cadence. As the years roll by we learn to exchange classroom parties for school dances, and recess for study hall, but the comfort of our rituals remains relatively unbroken for our dozen and one academic years. It lulls us into thinking along with the song writer that “times will never change…things will always be the same.”

Uniformity and like-mindedness become the glue that unites us to the souls sharing desks in our classrooms. Individuality is heralded only if the student can excel beyond his or her peers in a given arena. As time passes and we move from middle school to high school, the element of school spirit is added to the ties that bind us. We are indoctrinated at pep rallies and on playing fields and courts that we are unbeatable. We are number one. No one stops to consider how such an elitist mentality will impact our psyches when we are no longer sharing mindless gossip about our chemistry partner’s new hair style or what color of nail polish will go best with our homecoming gown. We haven’t yet considered that our school’s rivals and football field enemies will become our co-workers and college classmates.

Sometime following the two week Christmas break of our senior year, when the deadlines for scholarship applications loom near and we are faced with the need to select a college major, reality begins to seep into our consciousness, and as the rap lyrics foretell, we realize that “when we leave this year we won’t be coming back.” The comfortable safety of our routine, the rituals of over a decade, begins to evaporate before our eyes. Although we are living out the final days of high school, we are also observing in our mind’s eye the fleeting scenes of our personal “film without sound.” We have become not only the actors, but the audience of these moments in time.
A senior band member marches onto a football field at half time, raises a flute to pursed lips and mechanically delivers the well-rehearsed notes, while her mind observes elementary students giggling and running between the concession stand and the bleachers. She remembers when she was one of those students, “all the times we had together.” The light-hearted, carefree innocence of days long past is as real as if she had stepped back in time. And for that moment she lives two different realities simultaneously. Her mind shuttles at light speed between the past, the present and the approaching future. Will the black-garbed anti-social Goth who lethargically announces yet another correct answer in physics class go on to form his own Fortune 500 company, or be seen on a six o’clock news cast being dragged off in hand cuffs and leg irons by the riot police? Who is this stranger who has shared our space for a dozen years? What does he believe? Who are his idols; what are his dreams?

For many high school seniors, myself included, these types of reflection take place with increased frequency during those final months of public education. Suddenly the routine that we have taken for granted and at times railed against, becomes a cherished dying “friend”. It is wonderful because it is familiar. Yet, like it or not, we are forced to confront the reality that our closed world is about to open up to inescapable change.

At the same time we begin to look at the people around us as more than the classmates we have been conditioned to accept and embrace. Suddenly our differences and flaws become glaring faults, and we are no longer inclined to tolerate the more offensive ones. The running back’s endless tales of how he scored both on and off the field are held under a microscopic spot light. As we become apprehensive about what lies beyond school walls, and we start to question the isolated world we’ve been a part of, some find the courage to challenge the running back’s
sexist remarks, while others who are consumed with their own mounting fears no longer see the humor in his remarks or can find the energy to laugh.

Like the pains of labor and delivery, these are the first discomforting twinges that alert us that, ready or not, we are engaged in the birthing process into adulthood. And just as our own entrances into the world were unique, for some the process will be accomplished with little more than some intense panting and gentle pushes, while for others the ordeal will be filled with searing pain and a deluge of tears. Our questions become more relevant and the need for answers more urgent. Why was making first chair in band such a life and death matter eight months ago? Will I even pick up my flute after graduation? Will good grades be enough to get me into college, or a guarantee of a job or success after I finish at the university?

We are told that in college there will be no prodding by instructors to work on upcoming assignments, no reminders that term paper deadlines are drawing near. No employer will call when Billy doesn’t show up for work to see if he’s ill. A string of unexcused absences means no income, and more than likely, no job. When the captain of the majorettes had cramps in high school she could run to the sympathetic family doctor for a medical excuse and Daddy’s insurance would pay the bill. With no plans for college and looking for her first minimum wage job, she must confront the reality of what she’ll do if she becomes seriously ill. One moment you’re choosing your outfit to a bonfire rally, and the next you’re hit with whether your employer will offer medical coverage and if you’ll make enough to pay for it. It’s little wonder that suddenly being forced to confront the dilemmas of impending adulthood leads to the dramatic mood swings that rip through the classrooms of high school seniors.

Vitamin C’s song alludes to the idea that friendship and long talks on the phone will get you through these challenging times. Not even high school love that “came too soon” and that
most are emotionally ill-prepared to handle is enough, it seems, to ease the intense reflection and
accompanying anxiety that is characteristic of this time frame in a young person’s life. For
myself and others, her words about love ring true. Many will dissolve romantic relationships
during their senior year, becoming irritated and picking fights over unimportant issues. The
purpose of these engineered break ups is not so the individual can embark on another
relationship, but so that there is one less responsibility that demands the senior’s time and
attention. For those who have been fortunate enough to form one or two friendships of any
depth, the realization hits home that distant colleges, time consuming jobs, and military boot
camps are going to separate us from these people who have held onto our deepest secrets,
laughed at our jokes, listened to our problems and shared our school day rituals. Like those who
keep a death watch at the bedside of the terminally ill, there is a bitter sweet appreciation for
these last days spent together. And entanglements with the opposite sex only tend to complicate
matters and cut into our final moments with those few friends who came to love us in spite of our
faults.

It’s no wonder that the impending loss of their emotional support group fills seniors with
anxiety. To be birthed into college campuses and the working world as an anonymous entity,
starting over at square one, is a frightening proposition. Only for those students who have
existed in invisibility will the future have little change. In fact, having learned how to function
without the perks of social prestige, acknowledgement or accolades may actually provide them
with an advantage upon graduation; at the very least it will present them with a level playing
field. For these students graduation may truly be their “time to fly”.

Those students who casually strolled school halls, basking in the joys of juvenile
popularity must now come to terms with the realization that being crowned prom queen, or
named MVP of your baseball team won’t get you much outside the doors of your alma mater. These students may also “fly” following graduation, but they’ll be flying without a safety net of elevated social standing. Their friends will no longer be there to ease the discomfort of their new surroundings because they’re too busy dealing with their own unnerving environments.

Vitamin C’s song is a wonderful last minute graduation present for those students that want to cling to the past just a little bit longer. But for those students brave enough to face their unknown futures, the chorus might have been more effective if it had ended with a question, “And as our lives change, come whatever, will we still be friends forever?”