

Going to the chapel

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 28, 1998](#) issue

Nostalgia and paradox seem to have nothing in common. Nostalgia is a single-minded devotion to a romanticized image of the past. Paradox, being double-minded, cannot describe anything in one-sided terms. But I read something recently that was both nostalgic and paradoxical.

Years ago, chapel attendance at some colleges, including some state universities, was compulsory. Today the requirement survives chiefly at evangelical colleges-the Catholics having thrown the manacles and whips away decades ago, and mainstream Protestants having liberated the masses even before that. Good riddance!

I hit the campus lecture trail in 1956, just in time to encounter the last days of compulsory chapel. This was a horror to speakers, which the inviting faculty knew. They hid the request in followup letters describing the terms of our visits-"and oh, by the way, address chapel."

I recall a trauma at Ohio Wesleyan back then. A chapel full of students opted for my talk as "the least worst" of the three chapel talks from which they had to choose that week. In the front rows students read newspapers. Many visited. Some belched or made other bodily sounds. Later they would apologize and say, "Nothing personal; we aren't fighting you; we're after the administrators." And some of the rudest in chapel were the most attentive in class and lecture, most ready for coffee with me. Administrations read the handwriting on the chapel pews and stopped requiring attendance. Any chapel speaker will tell you that he or she prefers 80 voluntary bodies to 800 compelled ones.

Good riddance, say veterans, who might add, "On the other hand . . ." Why? They know that chapel offered something valuable. So the alumni are conflicted. Chapel attendance is both good and bad; it's a paradox.

The September issue of the *Muhlenberg Magazine*, from Muhlenberg College, a Lutheran school in Allentown, Pennsylvania, reported on a survey of alumni from classes between the 1930s and 1990. "Aside from the dome, what one thing says 'Muhlenberg' to you?" they were asked. Seven of 11 whose comments were printed said, "the chapel."

I am sure that all seven of these would vote against compulsory chapel, just as all seven would feel sorry for today's deprived students who don't share the experience.

Muhlenberg is a church college, so I suppose it was easier for chapel to be the focus in days when most students were Lutherans. Someone has told me that today more Jews than Lutherans attend Muhlenberg. That may or may not be true, but I am sure that pluralism rules there as it does most places. So it's less likely for a chapel to be the shared image of the school for most students.

I'm more often impressed by the "good kids" at the colleges I know than I am depressed by the others. I've not figured out why binge drinking makes stupes out of so many otherwise smart young adults. But that aside, I wouldn't trade today's students for the collegians of my generation, who wouldn't have known to volunteer for, say, Habitat for Humanity, as thousands now do. I doubt if they knew back then what volunteering meant. But they did have some common experiences that today's students who do not gather when the opportunity is there will forever lack. Most will be doomed to remember goal posts or coffee shops, not chapels. And they'll be poorer for that.