

Bill Rea ? Maybe I don't belong in pictures

Do you like seeing pictures of yourself?

Some people have substantial enough egos to revel in their own images.

Then there's the other end of the spectrum, with people who hate being photographed, often for puzzling reasons. I encounter a lot of them in my job. I think in most cases, they are just nervous. I have that effect on some people.

Age is sometimes a determining factor. Girls in or around Grade 8 seem particularly enthused. There have been many times when I have been in a school and heard some girls yell out, "Oh my god! It's the newspaper guy! Oh please take my picture!?"

Where was adulation like that from Grade 8 girls when I could have really used it, like when I was a Grade 8 boy?

Then there are the rest of us. I think most people are okay with some pictures of them, while they wish the rest of them could be trashed. I'm in that group.

And then there is disagreement over which pictures are good and which aren't. For example, the picture of my good self which has been accompanying my columns for more than five years now has sparked a certain amount of debate. I personally think it's pretty good, for reasons that I don't think I could put into words. It is reality that as long as I'm okay with it, I have a ready excuse for not going to the bother of having another taken. But there are also people who have told me they hate it. Over the years, I have come to appreciate that some people are just hard to please.

One of the problems is some of us have trouble smiling when a camera is pointed at us. There are, for example, the pictures of my wedding, particularly the shots of Beth and I cutting the cake. The expression on my clock in one of the pictures should have sent the photographer running for his life, especially since I was brandishing a large knife at the time. It wasn't that I was angry at anything in particular (Beth would not have tolerated that). It's just that I have a hard time looking jovial, even when I'm in the appropriate mood.

Of course, some of us are fearful about the pictures of us that might suddenly be made public without warning.

There was a picture in my Grade 11 Year Book of me in my underwear. How many of you reading this can truthfully make a statement like that (be honest)?

I was in a school musical play that year, and one of the scenes had a young woman surprising me in my room while I was getting dressed. No big deal. I had always known that there had been a lot of pictures taken at all stages of the production, from early rehearsals to final curtain calls, but I had always assumed there were no shots of me in that skimpy costume, which consisted of a pair of fluorescent red boxer shorts and an undershirt. There was a girl in my class on whom I was rather sweet at the time, but she made it known she was not interested in me. (Sound familiar, guys?) We were all flipping through our Year Books the day they were issued, and this girl suddenly started laughing hysterically. She had just seen the picture that made me one of the most talked-about people in the school that day; depicting me, seated on a bed with a girl, in a lot more of my glory than would normally be deemed appropriate for a high school kid, even if conventions were somewhat different in the mid-'70s.

Not that it was a problem. Indeed, to this day, I still manage a grin every time I think about the picture.

That's not the case with every photo I sat for in those years, as I was reminded the hard way earlier this year.

My uncle died in January. At the visitation, there was a projector set up, flashing a variety of family photographs, including one taken in my teens showing the results of my first (and very pitiful and forgettable) attempts at a moustache.

"I'll give you a buck if you destroy every copy of that picture," I said to one of my cousins. She giggled and I kept my money. The picture is still out there.

There are many people who have good reason to hate some of the pictures that have been taken of them, including a lot of politicians.

There was one woman I used to cover when I worked in Toronto for five years in the late '90s. She held elected office the whole time I was there, and she was a exercise in frustration to photograph because she always squinted. She was an attractive woman, but the camera just couldn't convey it. It wasn't just my skill with a camera that was lacking. Even studio pictures left her looking as if she desperately needed a good night's sleep. I should add things improved when she started wearing glasses.

Some people in office try to avoid having their pictures taken with their glasses on, and will remove them if they see a camera pointed their way. I've always had a grudging respect for former American president George Bush (Senior) and Prime Minister Stephen Harper, simply because they're not afraid to be seen or photographed in their specs.

And I still find myself on receiving ends of the occasional bawling out from politicians who don't like the expressions on their faces when their pictures appear in print. That's when group shots get especially tricky. It's sometimes hard to please everyone when there are a lot of people involved in the picture. It is true, however, that the more people you have in the picture, the greater the chance at

least one of them is not going to look too great. And even the magic of modern digital photography isn't going to get you around that problem. Trust me ? I've learned that the hard way.

So the answer, I think, is to not worry too much about what a camera is going to do to you and certainly don't blame the person on the other side of the machine. It is a fact that it has been many years since someone took a picture of me that didn't leave people with the impression that I have a lot of grey hair (the fact that I do is irrelevant). If I can handle that trauma, then everyone else should be able to deal with a bit of photographic grief

