

# Nostalgic for the Future

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Theme: [History](#)

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*Despite its pedigree as a fundamental element in civilization’s greatest stories, nostalgia has come to be associated with treacly sentimentality, defeatism, and spurious spiritual inclinations. Homer, Vergil, Dante, the Biblical writers, and their ilk would demur, of course, but they have been dead for a few years, so progress’s mantra urges us to get on with it. This is now.*

But now is always, and like its twin – exile – nostalgia is perpetual. The aching for “home” – from Greek *algos*, pain + *nostos*, homecoming – is not simply a desire for the past, whether in reality or imagination, time or place, but a passionate yearning for the best from the past to be brought into the future.

Nostalgia may be more a long ache of old people, but it is also a feeling that follows everyone along life’s way. Its presence may be shorter in youth, and it may be brief, intermittent, and unrecognized, but it is there. Surely it grows with experience. As everyone knows, a taste, a smell, a sight, a sound, a song – can conjure up a moment’s happiness, a reverie of possibility. Paradise regained, but differently. A yearning recognized, as with seeing for the first time how Van Gogh’s blue paint opens a door to ecstasy or a line of poetry cracks open a space in one’s heart for prospective love. Hope reborn as an aperture to the beyond reimagined and made possible.

There is no need to ever leave where we are to find that we are already no longer there, for living is a perpetual leaving-taking, and the ache of loss is its price.

But like all pains, it is one we wish to relieve in the future; and in order to make a future, we must be able to imagine or remember it first. We are all exiled in our own ways. Home was yesterday, and our lost homes lie in our futures, if we hold to the dream of homecoming, whatever that may mean to each person. But it also has a universal meaning, since we dwell on this earth together, our one home for our entire human family.

You may think I am engaging in fluff and puff and flimsy imaginings. But no.

All across the world there are hundreds of millions of exiles, forced by wars, power politics, poverty, starvation, destructive capitalism, and modernization’s calamitous consequences to

leave their homes and suffer the disorientation of wandering. Emigration, immigration, salvaging bits of the old in the new strange lands – thus is their plight. So much lost and small hopes found in nostalgic remembering. Piecing together the fragments.

But in a far less physical sense, the homeless mind is the rule today. There are very few people these days who don't wish to somehow return to a time when the madness that engulfs us didn't exist; to escape the whirligig of fragmented consciousness in which the world appears – i.e. is presented by the media – as a pointillistic painting whose dots move so rapidly that a coherent picture is near impossible. This feeling is widespread. It is not a question of politics. It crisscrosses the world following the hyper-real unreality of the technologies that join us in a state of transcendental homelessness and anxiety. All the propaganda about a “new normal” and a digital disembodied future ring hollow. The Great Reset is the Great Nightmare. Nothing seems normal anymore and the future seems even less so.

The world has become Weirdsville. This is something that most people – young and old – feel, even if they can't articulate it. The feeling that all the news is false and that some massive con game is underway is pandemic.

Here is an insignificant bit of nostalgia. I mention it because it points beyond itself, then and now. It has always been nostalgia for the future. I think it is a commonplace experience.

When I was in high school, there was a tiny cheese shop on Lexington Avenue and 85<sup>th</sup> St. in New York City near the subway that I took to and home from school. It was the size of a walk-in closet. Thousands of cheeses surrounded you when you entered. The smells were overwhelming. I would often stop in there with empty pockets on my way home from school. The proprietor, knowing I was in awe of the thousands of cheeses, would often give me little samples with pieces of crusty French bread. He would regale me with tales of Paris and the histories of the various European cheeses. He would emphasize their livingness, how they breathed. By the door was a large basket filled with long loaves of fragrant French bread flown in every morning from Paris by Air France. These were the days before every supermarket sold knockoff versions of the genuine thing. Each long loaf was in a colorful French tricolored paper bag.

Those loaves of bread in the French colors always transported me to Paris, a place I had never been, but whose language I was studying. Then, and for years afterwards, I was nostalgic for a Paris that was not yet part of my physical experience. How could this be? I asked myself. One day I realized that I was not nostalgic for Paris or the cheese shop, nor for the cheese or the bread, which I had tasted many times, but for the paper bags the bread came in. Why?

This question perplexed me until I realized my notion of nostalgia was wrong. For those bags had always represented the future for me, the birds of flight a sign of freedom beckoning as my youthful world expanded. My nostalgia for the Air France bags was a way to go back to go forward, not to wallow in sentimentality and the “good old days,” but to read the entrails for their prophetic message: the small-life world is limiting – expand your horizons.

It was not a question of jumping on a plane and going somewhere different, although that in

time would also be good. It was not an invitation to revisit that cheese shop, as if that were possible, for the store was long gone and in any case it would not mean the same thing. It was not a desire to become a teenager again. You cannot repeat an experience, despite F. Scott Fitzgerald writing: "You can't repeat the past?...Why of course you can."

The past in that sense is quicksand, a death wish. For many people (and this is the prevalent understanding of nostalgia as an exclusively negative way of thinking), embittered nostalgia is their way of denying the present and the future, often by the fictitious creation of "the good old days" when everything was supposedly so much better.

But nostalgia can also be an impetus to create a better future, a reminder that good aspects of what has been lost need to be regained to change the course of the present's future trajectory.

Today most people are bamboozled by world events, as an idiot wind blows through the putrescent words of the media sycophants who churn out their endlessly deceptive and confusing propaganda on behalf of their elite masters. Given a few minutes peace of mind to analyze this drivel - a tranquility destroyed by the electronic frenzy - it becomes apparent that their fear, anxiety, and contradictory reports are intentional, part of a strategy to pound down the public into drooling, quaking morons.

But many people in their better moments do recall times when they experienced glimpses of a better life, transitory as those experiences might have been. Moments when they felt more at home in their skin in a world where they belonged and they could make better sense of the news they received. Not lost and wandering and constantly fearfully agitated by a future seemingly chaotic, leading to dusty death in a story told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

I suggest that those nostalgic moments revolve around the changing nature of our experience of space and time. There was a time when time was time and space and speed had some human meaning, for people lived within the limits of the natural world of which they were a part. As I wrote once before:

In former days you could cross over to other people's lives and come back with a different perspective, knowing what was obvious was true and that to exist meant to be composed of flesh and blood like all the others in different places and to be bound by the natural cycles of life and death, spring and fall, summer and winter. There were limits then, on the land, water, and even in the sky, where space too had dimensions and the stars and planets weren't imaginary landing strips for mad scientists and their partners in celluloid fantasies.

In that rapidly disappearing world where people felt situated in space and time, life was not yet a holographic spectacle of repetitive images and words, a pseudo-world of shadowy figures engaging in pseudo-debates on electronic screens with people traveling from one place to another only to find that they never left home. When the mind is homeless and the grey magic of digital propaganda is its element, life becomes a vast circinate wandering to nowhere. The experience of traveling thousands of miles only to see the same chain of stores lining the same roads in the same towns across a country where the same people live with their same machines and same thoughts in their same lives in their same clothes. A mass society of mass minds in the hive created by cell phones and measured in nanoseconds where the choices are the freedom to

choose what is always the same within a cage of categories meant to render all reality a 'mediated reality.'

Nostalgia is always about time and space. In that sense, it is equivalent to all human experience that also takes place within these dimensions. And when technology has radically disrupted our human sense of limits in their regard, it becomes harder and harder to feel at home, to dwell enough to grasp what is happening in the world.

I believe that many people feel nostalgic for slower and more silent days when they could hear themselves think a bit. When the sense of always being on the go and lacking time predominates as it does today, thinking becomes very difficult. To think, one must dethrone King Rush and silence Queen Noise, the two conditions that the speed and noise of digital technology render impossible. Tranquilized by the beeping trivia pouring out of the omnipresent electronic gadgets, the very devices being used by the elites to control the masses, a profound grasp of the source of one's disquietude is impossible. The world becomes impossible to read. The sense of always being away, ungrounded, and mentally homeless in a cacophonous madhouse becomes the norm. One feels sick in heart and mind.

Most people sense this, and whether they think of it as nostalgia or not, I believe they feel that something important is missing and that they are wandering like rolling stones, as Dylan voiced it so poetically, with no direction home.

How does it feel? It feels lousy.

So it's not a question of returning to "the good old days." The future beckons. But if we don't find a way to rediscover those essential human needs of slowness and silence, to name but two, I am afraid we will find ourselves speeding along into an inferno of our own making, where it's noisy as hell and not fit for human habitation.

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