

This article offers us another perspective about social changes, theology, and the future. It's focused on America but since we are often influenced by them, we also need to pay attention to ideas that are presented here. We all know that it's human nature to have nostalgia – “Oh, those good old days.” Yet we also know that covid will bring changes – whether we like them or not. Like maybe – hand shakes will not return. And it's also an opportunity to learn and reflect of who we are a people of faith.

So I hope you take note of key points as well as your key questions from this article.

Our Nostalgia Is Spiritually Dangerous

Why we shouldn't worship the golden calf of the 'pre-COVID' days.

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Remember New Year's Eve, when we thought 2020 would be our year? Similar discussions and memes lit up social media when the world stopped in the following months. Our yearning for the past now pervades the most mundane corners of life, from making a routine stop at the coffee shop, to checking sports scores before heading to bed, to seeing shelves piled high with toilet paper at the grocery store. We even miss the daily annoyances: jostling to get onto the subway at rush hour, sitting in traffic, or the loud music from the party next door.

We also cannot help but notice the devastation of our new normal: individuals who live alone, enduring long stretches without human touch, or people losing loved ones without being able to hold a proper funeral. Without the warmth of direct connection, we feel unable to enter into moments of triumph or struggle in the lives of those close to us. Perhaps that's what we're truly nostalgic for—the ability to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn in a fully present, embodied way.

From the warm hues of our Instagram filters, to throwback fashions in storefront displays, to the political slogans that capture the collective imagination (“Make America Great Again”), nostalgic yearning runs the gamut of human experience. In its run-of-the-mill forms, it can provide a pleasant kind of closure—think of the picture slideshow at a graduation or a wedding. But that same yearning can dredge up unresolved loss in ways that tempt us to recreate a sanitized, distorted version of the past. Wistful longing for a simpler time comes easily during this dysfunctional present. But left unchecked, that nostalgia can lead us alarmingly astray.

After being miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt, the house of Israel had sworn a solemn oath before God to uphold the Ten Commandments, which forbade worshiping other gods or graven images. Several weeks later the people cornered Aaron the high priest and demanded that he manufacture new gods for them to venerate (Ex. 32:1). How did they succumb so quickly to idolatry?

Had they stopped believing in Yahweh? This seems unlikely. The Israelites had witnessed one wondrous sign after another: the ten plagues, the Red Sea parting before them, pillars of cloud and fire guiding their way. They had seen God's power. Did they act out of fear? It had been 40 days since Moses went up Mount Sinai. No one knew when—or if—he would come back. Perhaps the prospect of facing the wilderness without their leader set them on edge. Yet when Moses first revealed the Ten Commandments, the people felt such terror at God's presence that they feared for their lives (Ex. 20:20). They had every reason to fear God more than the wilderness.

There's a more prosaic explanation for this otherwise baffling betrayal: the people of Israel had become consumed with nostalgia. As the euphoria of crossing the Red Sea subsided and the reality of wilderness life set in, the people yearned for the bread and the fleshpots of Egypt. So God gave them manna (Ex. 16:3). As they ate manna day after day their craving grew stronger and more specific: fish, cucumbers, leeks, onions, garlic (Num. 11:4-5). So God gave them quail (Ex. 16:12-13; Num. 11:31-32). But their culinary longing had awakened something deeper. They pined for the stable, predictable rhythms of the life they had known for 400 years. This yearning consumed them to the point that they lost sight of why they needed deliverance in the first place.

Then Moses disappeared up Mount Sinai. His absence presented an opportunity to recreate that former life as best they could—the feasting, the celebration, the religious customs. Aaron the high priest collected golden trinkets from the people that they associated with Egypt and fashioned them into an idol. The next day, the people caroused so raucously before the golden calf that Moses's companion Joshua mistook the noise for the sound of war (Ex. 32:17).

The golden calf debacle was the product of willful misremembering. The house of Israel understandably missed the familiarity, the routine, and the other good aspects of the life they had built in Egypt. Their old world was gone, and their new world was a wilderness of uncertainty. But nostalgia so consumed them that they overlooked 400 years of bondage *and* broke the first and second commandments in order to conjure an idealized, distorted past. They lost their moral bearings so completely that God considered wiping them out before Moses intervened (Ex. 32:11-14).

And it all started with a hankering for a good meal.

How can something as seemingly harmless as nostalgia prove to be so spiritually dangerous? C. S. Lewis observes in *The Screwtape Letters* that the work of the Spirit unfolds in the present. Responding to the Spirit requires “obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure.”

One of sin's defining features, therefore, is that it ruptures our connection to the present. Lewis points out that most vices, such as fear, ambition, or lust, tempt us to obsess about the future. Nostalgia, by contrast, is oriented toward the past. Since it nudges us in the opposite direction of most other vices, we tend to see it as innocuous by comparison. But spiritually speaking, *that* we lose contact with the present matters more than how. The longer a vice keeps us from facing the challenges and appreciating the blessings of our present, the more spiritually corrosive it becomes. And precisely because it *feels* pleasant and harmless, nostalgia can be devastatingly effective at throwing us out of sync with the work of the Spirit for prolonged stretches of time.

Giving into fantasies of the past cheats us of the opportunity to cultivate hope that overcomes despair.

In small doses, nostalgia can replenish us: who hasn't felt refreshed after reminiscing with old friends? But unbridled nostalgia causes us to cling to the golden calf that reminds us of the past rather than recognize the pillars of cloud and fire guiding us through our uncertain present. As the Psalmist reminds us about idols: “They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths.” The passage closes with a warning: “Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them” (Ps. 135:15-18). Lot's wife was transformed into a pillar of salt because she looked back on Sodom (Gen. 19:26). She became as inert and fixed in time as the imagined past she longed for. Spiritually speaking, we risk the same fate when we idolize a misremembered past.

How do we keep nostalgia from spiritually paralyzing us? We start by being honest with ourselves. Whatever we told ourselves was “normal life” before 2020 no longer exists. It ended as epidemic became pandemic; as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd breathed their last. No economic miracle or executive order can bring back human lives, our sense of safety, or our rhythms and routines.

Facing this reality can stir up grief. We should allow space to process our collective loss. The Spirit can transfigure that grief into “godly sorrow” that brings repentance and salvation. But we must be open to the Spirit’s work, lest we succumb to the “worldly sorrow” that brings death (2 Cor. 7:10).

As Lewis emphasizes, this openness to the Spirit is an active process. How might we put “obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure” into practice?

In our current environment, the crosses are obvious. The pleasures may be harder discern, but spiritually speaking, vital to acknowledge and appreciate. I have found that they manifest for me in old friendships rekindled via laptop screens. They crop up in the daily walks my wife and I take to stave off cabin fever in our small New Jersey town. As we wander nearby streets, we stop and chat with neighbors far more frequently than before. I’m seeing service sector workers in a new light—grocery store clerks, mail carriers, truck drivers, trash collectors—and appreciating the ways they make modern life possible. I’m learning to enjoy everyday tasks like cooking and yard work. These “present pleasures” will vary from person to person. But they may very well be the manna that sustains us.

In times like these, communities of faith can offer something far more edifying than nostalgia: hope. Hope, in its full biblical sense, arises out of hardship: “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance produces character; character produces hope.” This hope endures precisely because it is the work of the Spirit: “hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:3-5). Hope takes root when the people of God follow the Spirit’s prompting to face the present trial.

Nostalgia, on the other hand, can tempt us to indulge phantoms of an idyllic past rather than face the present hardship. Giving into fantasies of the past cheats God’s people of the opportunity to cultivate hope that overcomes despair.

Our comfortable, settled American (Canadian) life has given way to a season of wilderness. Wilderness spaces unsettle us to our core by confronting us with how contingent our lives are. The manna God provides in such spaces does not taste like what we’re used to. But it nourishes us in ways that the rich fare of our previous settled life could not. As our current crises carry on, we will be sorely tempted to recreate an idealized, selectively remembered past rather than attend to the needs and concerns of the present. But God’s people must discipline themselves to focus on the here and now. For that is where the work of the Spirit unfolds, making all things new.

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