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CHANGING TIMES

# The future of nostalgia

What will we have to look back on, considering that the present is so empty?

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If there is nostalgia years from now, it won't be for us.

People are not going to dress up as us or stage re-enactments of our wars or collect our cellular phones, our books on healing and empowerment, our CDs of Old Age music, our pepper grinders, our billions of T-shirts.

They will resent what we did to the country, and we will go down in their history as the age of effluvia, with the simple moral: If you love trash too much, you will make yourself stupid.

By "trash" I don't mean a publication such as *The New York Times*. People are going to miss it a lot — they'll think: What a wonderful thing a newspaper was! You opened it and there it was, you didn't have to wait three minutes for the art to download, and when your wife said, "Give me a section," you did.

People will also miss the verb "said," which was replaced by "went."

They'll miss handwritten messages. E-greetings will have dancing graphics and sound effects and be incredibly creative and multilayered and dense, but it was nice when people used to put a pen to the paper and scribble something.

People will look back fondly on the day when you could race to the airport, check your baggage at the curb and get on a plane, before security required that bags be shipped ahead as freight and every carry-on be unpacked and the contents spread out on tables and many specific

questions be answered. Six hours to fly from New York to Washington or Boston.

They'll miss that time in the past — it really did exist — when kids used to mess around outdoors. Go off and just do stuff. Build forts, have wars, die, hang out.

People will feel nostalgia for celebrities.

**People will miss that it once meant something to be Southern or Midwestern. It doesn't mean much now, except for the climate. Out on the Minnesota prairie, the little Swede towns are dying and the vast suburbs are booming, which are identical to the suburbs of Atlanta or Charlotte, where people live on Anonymous Drive in Homogeneous Hills, people who, when you meet them, the question "Where are you from?" doesn't lead to anything odd or interesting.**

— Garrison Kellor

real ones, like there used to be back when there were three TV networks and Americans watched the same shows at the same time and talked about them the next day at



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work. Television was common currency. Sunday afternoons you watched the NFL game with your dad on the couch and then you went to the table and ate pot roast and mashed potatoes. Everybody else did the same thing.

Every American knew Sinatra by sight and by voice, but when you scattered the audience among 200 cable-TV channels and 1,000 movies you could watch on the Internet and 10,000 CDs you could download, there weren't many true celebrities anymore. People will miss them.

There will be new celebrities, thousands of them, but not many people will know who they are.

Old American institutions fade away,

like the family doctor. Patients wending their way through the labyrinths of factory health care will think back fondly on that legendary man with the stethoscope who knew who you were and knew your family.

And the American public school: how remarkable it will seem someday.

With the introduction of school vouchers, you got to send your kids to schools where they learned the truth — your choice — Our Lady of Sorrows, Four-square Millennial Gospel, Moon Goddess, Malcolm X, the Open School of Whatever, the Academy of Hairy-Legged Individualism, the School of the Green Striped Tie, you name it, and who could argue with the idea of free choice? — until you stop and think about the old idea of the public school, a place where you went to find out who inhabits this society other than people like you.

People will miss that it once meant something to be Southern or Midwestern. It doesn't mean much now, except for the climate. Out on the Minnesota prairie, the little Swede towns are dying and the vast suburbs are booming, which are identical to the suburbs of Atlanta or Charlotte, where people live on Anonymous Drive in Homogeneous Hills, people who, when you meet them, the question "Where are you from?" doesn't lead to anything odd or interesting.

They live somewhere near a Gap store, and what else do you want to know?

I think that people will be powerfully

nostalgic for the mid-century. The '50s wasn't Elvis or the Beats or Joe McCarthy so much as it was the era of Middle America, when the earnings of skilled workers and the earnings of executives were within view of each other, not in two different worlds, and everybody's kids went to school together, and everyone believed in a kind of social progress and achieving peace through better understanding and working together to make a better world.

Eleanor Roosevelt was around then, widely admired as an idealist and crusader. Then things changed, and smart people didn't build a better world, they built careers, and they were only interested in Eleanor as a closeted lesbian trapped in a dysfunctional marriage.

One more thing. People will miss a time when there wasn't so much nostalgia. In the '60s we looked to the future, which we imagined would be streamlined, shiny, modern, and then suddenly modernism died.

The past got preserved left and right, historic buildings, old streetlamps went up like weeds, and Victorian theme malls, Sleazy TV producers renovated big white Congregationalist houses and filled them with old bookcases and rocking chairs and pretended to be New England transcendentalists — the past was copied, quoted, constantly evoked, until one day the country looked more like it used to than it ever had before.

I say, forget it. Just get over it. There's the future out there. Go live it.