

On Nostalgia

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Nostalgia is remembering things in the past, with feelings.

The feelings are usually mixed.

1. Nostalgia is about the Present

Whereas nostalgia refers to the past, its psychological and social functions are in the present. In a way, nostalgia is usually motivated by our current needs and conditioned by our present circumstances.

Nostalgia serves to spice up the life of people who are generally happy or satisfied. Excessive preoccupation with nostalgia, on the other hand, can be a sign of lack of satisfaction, direction, or purpose in current life.

2. Nostalgia is about Loss

We usually do not get nostalgic over things that are still easily available.

We only feel nostalgic about things past when they are no longer easily accessible. We do not feel nostalgic about things simply because they are old, if we can still access them readily. Nostalgia is therefore related to loss somehow.

Yet we do not just settle for the loss. We wish to reclaim it. The major tool at our disposal is memory. Our memory is a great transformer of reality. First, it is always selective. In most situations, we tend to recall the things we like. Hence the saying, "the good old days". We usually select the more self-flattering elements.

There are occasions of us remembering things that are negative or challenging, but when we become sentimental about them, it usually serves some useful function now. For instance, the past suffering may make us feel better about what we have now. People who experience poverty and hardship in the past but have become better-off now can be "nostalgic" about the not so good old days, but that still makes them feel good about the present. People who have never left the state of poverty and hardship are less likely to be in a similar nostalgic mood.

3. Nostalgia is about History and Identity

The collective identity of a people is often defined by its history. People who do not share the history are often excluded from participating in the celebration of this history. Recalling the shared experience can be part of a ritualistic performance of group identity. This “nostalgic” recall performs the dual political function of inclusion and exclusion. Imagine you going to your own high-school reunion; and then imagine yourself at a reunion of a school that you did not attend.

The recall of shared history is a powerful tool for inclusion and exclusion. For example, new immigrants to a new country can be easily reminded of their “outsider” status in a party when people collectively recall their experience of the time before the immigrants’ arrival.

4. Nostalgia is about Guilt and Aggression

We talked about nostalgia and loss. Loss can evoke sadness, resentment, and anger. Sometimes the things we “lost” are things that we have given up, abandoned, or replaced with something else.

In the book of Genesis in the Judeo-Christian Bible, Cain the farmer killed his brother Abel the keeper of flocks, because God had looked upon his brother’s offering with favor. Apart from concluding that God is likely not a vegetarian, we can read the story as a narrative to deal with the collective guilt when we move from one cultural form to another. In this case, we are talking about the transition from the keeping of flocks to farming.

The fratricide drama conveys the emotional intensity and complexity of our internal psychological process. We all feel ambivalent towards progress, and many people are simply uncomfortable with change.

A contemporary example is the move from farming to industrial production, from rural to urban living. When we moved from one cultural form or lifestyle to another, we tend to overlook the fact that it was our individual and collective choices that produced the transition. We have become “nostalgic” about country-style, an idyllic life-world, and we take on an anti-urban hostility. We become obsessed with the natural, and idealize it as clean and uncontaminated. We try to take breaks and “escape” from the city, and to have a taste of the country. We imagine the city as contaminated and dangerous, and inhabited by people who are morally inferior. The truth is we are attracted to the city, and we all gravitate towards it. We cannot stand acknowledging the fact that we actually cannot stand the country. The country is always there, and why don’t we all go back?

We bemoan the urban transformation of the landscape, the skyline, or the community relationships, and dream of the idealized country life, but we ARE the city.

Guilt is, in a sense, anger towards oneself. Most people have difficulty dealing with their own anger and guilt. Most people have to deal with them through denial, suppression, or channeling it onto something else. These are the ways people deal with the most important feelings in life, including sex and erotic desire. These make an honest pursuit of happiness difficult.

Eventually, we all have to return to the present. While taking a little nostalgic excursion can be quite entertaining, it is important for us to make sense of our current life, and to enjoy it.

*** *The End* ***