

# Nostalgia is Killing People Again



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President Trump delivers remarks at the 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration without social distancing or mask requirements for the crowd. (Official White House Photo by Tia Dufour)

The last person to die of nostalgia was an American soldier serving in the first world war. Proposed as a medical condition in the late 1600s, nostalgia was named from the Greek *nostos*, or homecoming, and *algos*, which means pain, grief, or distress, to explain the condition of Swiss mercenaries at the time, whose deep longing for their native land was seen to cause a host of maladies: insomnia, fever, loss of appetite, weakness, and even death by wasting. It was considered a serious condition that necessitated outlawing

a particular Swiss milking song, the playing of which was punishable by death lest it induce reverie among the troops.

That nostalgia was originally seen to afflict soldiers marks it as a forerunner to post-traumatic stress disorder. Today, nostalgia comprises a range of emotions, both sweet and bitter, that arise from thinking about the past. Thinking about the past is entirely more comfortable for us than thinking about the future for the very reason that we are able to control it. We can influence our story about the past and our relationship to it, what it means to us, and how it fits into our larger sense of ourselves. This is the very power of narrative memory, which is a creative process, for every time we access memories we create them anew.

But traumatic memories are encoded in a completely different way. When faced with extreme violence or distress, the meaning-making left hemisphere of the brain may go offline, leaving pure sensation — sounds, smells, or images that aren't connected to language or placed within the coherent timeline of our lives — just flashes that return again and again, ceaselessly haunting us. The goal of therapy for many traumatized individuals is to bring these memories into conscious control, where they can be understood and woven into the larger stories of our lives.

I tell you this as a person whose brain and body were so racked by trauma that I didn't even know to name it until I found myself in the throes of recovery years later and quite by accident. It was only as I began to practice yoga regularly in my twenties that I discovered what it felt like to truly inhabit my own body, which felt like coming home or being a kid again. I remember the novelty of feeling sensation in my toes for the first time, then my walking feet on the ground and a heart, my heart. I remember that I felt strikingly different than I had before, which now seems only like blankness or absence to me.

Similarly, my brain came fully online after years of practicing meditation. I cannot remember what it felt like before that only because I do not think it *was* a feeling, to be remembered. I can only tell you that afterward I felt more and more as if I could choose the direction I wanted to go in each moment of my life, instead of as if things were merely happening to me beyond my control, a wave to ride to the other side. I do remember describing the way I had felt as if I kept bumping up against No and then being rendered powerless to act. I had things that I wanted to say or do, but my brain or

body would not allow me to say or do them, and then the moment passed, leaving me paralyzed.

Trauma is, fundamentally, a disorder of living in the past. Imagination, as a faculty, is diminished in the traumatized brain. This is important as it is only possible to make change in our lives and in the world if we believe in things that we have not seen. I could not see these things and I could not believe them, so I could not make them real in my life. Every day, I tried to get through the day, living in a perpetual present. The future was less something I was afraid of than something I could not even begin to imagine. It simply did not exist in my world. When we get bogged down thinking about the past, we limit our ability to deal with the conditions of the present, and, like trauma survivors, we fail to imagine the individual and collective actions we can take to create a better future.

Nostalgia is a sentimentality for the past that, similar to narrative memory, may or may not have anything to do with reality. History is, as they say, written by the winners. When we praise things like Manifest Destiny, as Donald Trump recently did, we, I guess, imagine the power of white civilization stretching across the imagined untamed continent, ignoring the death marches of indigenous people, the black folks denied access to land, the decimation of the native flora and fauna. (It was not tame.) When we say we want to Make America Great Again, we imagine a bygone era that was actually defined by government social programs, tax policies, and lending requirements that benefited white Americans at the expense of people of color, and we ignore that it was all dependent on the new exploitation of fossil fuels at the expense of our future climate stability.

As Alan Hirsch relates:

*Within the psychiatric framework, nostalgia may be considered a yearning to return home to the past — more than this, it is a yearning for an idealized past — a longing for a sanitized impression of the past, what in psychoanalysis is referred to as a screen memory — not a true recreation of the past, but rather a combination of many different memories, all integrated together, and in the process all negative emotions filtered out... If one defines nostalgia as a yearning for an idealized past, the bittersweet nature of it becomes clearer. One can never return to this past, it never truly existed. And the present reality, no matter how good, can never be as good as an ideal — which nostalgia has created.*

Asked what era they might like to travel back in time to, anyone who is not a straight white male may well respond with a blank stare. Queer people, Black and brown people, even the disabled and those with chronic medical conditions do not have any use for romanticizing the past because the conditions of the past literally oppressed and killed us (which does not mean that the conditions of the present will not do the same, of course, while acknowledging that we have made some kind of progress, a bit). Rather than make America great again, we want to make America again!, as Langston Hughes wrote: “America never was America to me.”

Which is to say, nostalgia is killing people again. Mobility data now indicates that Americas are moving about at near pre-pandemic levels. “Illinois is closed and we’ve been wanting to get out,” a Chicagoan visiting a resort town in Wisconsin said in mid-May. “I know it’s probably bad. I’m just kind of done with it all,” he added. But the virus, of course, is not done with us. “We don’t cover our faces in America!” an unmasked woman yells while picking up takeout in a viral video I won’t link to here. You’ve seen them. This nostalgic vision of America as a place where one is free to engage in commerce (for what other means to construct identity are we allowed, this late into American capitalism?) the way they had before prevents anti-maskers from adapting to the demands of the reality we now find ourselves in.

Trump and those who serve him create nostalgia for an idealized past to distract us from the intolerable conditions of the present and a better future that seems unimaginable — as government does little more than call in refrigerated trailers when morgues fill up in the wake of a debilitating new virus, state-sanctioned police violence brutalizes protesters on camera every night and black and brown bodies every day, widespread unemployment hits those who were already struggling to make ends meet, the cost of housing grows ever farther out of reach, we are unable to travel abroad, even if we wanted to, and we begin to realize that we are fucking trapped. Wouldn’t it be nice to just send the kids back to school in the fall and pretend like none of this is happening? Weren’t those good times?

Twenty-First Century Americans, in throes to nostalgia for the before times, may have listed as their cause of death complications from the coronavirus, but they will have died from nostalgia — theirs, or, more tragically, in the case of so-called essential workers, ours.