"The Creativity of Nostalgia"
A Sermon in Three Parts
by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
November 25, 2018

Part One: What do you remember fondly?

One of the great joys in life is happy memories. Nostalgia, at its best, helps to reconnect us with a part of the past that holds happy personal associations. Although there can be a down side to nostalgia, which we'll get to in part two, I do think a healthy dose of nostalgia can do some good for the soul. Remembering these happy associations can bring a smile.

So, what do *you* remember fondly? What object or image triggers a warm-fuzzy feeling in you? Why? What's the story?

Typically, at this point in the service we have a "Time for All Ages." Well, today it's going to be an all-ages, interactive moment. In the weekly e-blast, I asked you to please bring items of nostalgia to share. If you did not bring something, Kate and I have also placed some items and some pictures of items in the windowsills along the edges of the sanctuary. In the pews or by the windows, please gather in small groups of about 4-6 people—ideally with a mix of ages—to share your memories.

Please make sure everyone has a chance to speak. I will alert you when it's time to start wrapping up before bringing the time to a close.

[If you are reading this sermon, perhaps you can take a moment to find an object and/or share with another your own answer to these questions.]

Thank you for sharing with one another. I suspect there were both different and some shared memories. Did you learn something new? I suspect we all did. When we listen to one another's memories and their stories, our own understanding of another person and of our shared world expands. Which is why it matters to listen to the stories others tell . . . and to tell our own stories. And hopefully this keeps alive our connections to the happy moments, small pleasures, and great joys of our lives.

And now, here's a musical moment for those who fondly remember the 1980 movie *Fame . . .*

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Part Two: What Do We Forget When We're Nostalgic?

In preparing for this service, Kate, [our Director of Education and Engagement], insisted we play "Memory" from *Cats* only *after* she and the kids had left the room. "It's an ear worm!" she declared with disdain. Isn't that sort of what nostalgia can be also? Nostalgia can be an ear worm that winds its way into your brain repeating itself? "It was better back then." "If only it was like it used to be." "When I was a kid _____."

But the ear worm of nostalgia can crowd out any other way of thinking about the past, making our memories selective.

On Friday evening, our family decided to watch a movie on TV. Because of the turn to the holiday season—and, well, maybe because mom has been thinking a lot about nostalgia this week—we chose the 1990 film *Home Alone*. Have you seen it? It's become quite the "American classic," so I'll not worry about 'spoilers', ok?

What I *remembered* about the movie is how the little boy, Kevin, played by Macaulay Culkin, defended his house against intruders using toys, household objects, and *a lot* of ropes. Once again, I laughed along at the clever hijinks and overly expressive responses of the two burglars.

But there was a lot I didn't remember. This "family friendly" film aimed at kids began with a chaotic scene of multiple adults and kids rushing around in a very large house. Eight-year old Kevin is told to pack his suitcase and treated as an incompetent fool for asking for help with his task. Over dinner, Kevin's older brother fiercely taunts him and Kevin angrily rushes at his brother causing some spills and overall disruption. As his mother grabs hold of Kevin, his uncle calls him a "little jerk." Escorting Kevin from the room, his mother sighs with an exasperation bordering on disgust—"Kevin there are 15 people in this house and you are the only one causing trouble!" Sending him to sleep alone in the attic, they exchange heated words and he declares his wish that he didn't have a family. His mother challenges him to say it again, "maybe it will come true!"

That's some harsh dialogue! Rather than the light-hearted, "ah shucks, we forgot a kid in the chaos" storyline I remembered, this was also a narrative of a benign neglect, at best, and of a family system that tolerated active bullying with surprising indifference to the experience and fears of childhood. Yes, the mom tried very hard to reach her son and get back to him. And, yes, *this is a movie*. But, in addition to making me feel very grateful for cellphones and modern airport security systems, the movie demonstrated how quickly

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cultural norms can change. An adult calling a kid a jerk?!? I just don't think we'd see that today after decades of anti-bullying work in schools. Thank goodness!

And this is an example of why nostalgia is criticized as seeing the past through rose-colored glasses. We remember the humor of hijinks and "forget" the harshness of a family to a little kid. We remember the good parts as the negative aspects fade and a more complex picture is lost.

A prominent example of nostalgia "forgetting" a more complex past is the campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again." By referring back to a better past, President Trump relied on the power of nostalgia to help elect him. But which America serves as Trump's model for greatness? In looking back into history for a model, he disavows more recent social changes that moved our culture towards more racial and gender equality, religious diversity, and civil rights for LGBTQ folks.

To be clear, in critiquing "Make American Great Again," I'm not seeking to be politically partisan. I'm critiquing a prominent example of how using nostalgia as a rose-colored appeal can "forget" the tremendous pain and injustices of many people. It's important to ask ourselves who or what we may be forgetting when we're feeling nostalgic.

In creating the 'nostalgia posters' that are scattered through the sanctuary, I realized more than halfway through that all the images of people were white: the covers of the Sears catalog and TV Guide; the women shopping for groceries with a head full of rollers; and the vintage images of Superman and Wonder Woman. When I tried to rectify this to make the images more racially and culturally diverse, I realized two things: 1) as a white woman my knowledge of cultural references are much more familiar with the details of white culture; 2) that the examples of African American culture that first come to mind are not the kinds of memories one would feel "nostalgic" about. How could you feel "nostalgic" about segregated schools or public accommodations? How could you feel "nostalgic" about the "good ole days" of voter suppression, extralegal killings in the form of lynching, or mass enslavement of African American persons? (Hmmm, some of these same issues of the past seem to not entirely be *in* the past do they?!!)

Moreover, all of the images on the poster are centered on U.S. culture. But, not all of us here today grew up in the U.S. Even so, I suspect we all have experience with nostalgia. Indeed, living far away from the land of one's birth, perhaps nostalgic moments of bittersweet remembering are even more potent and frequent.

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Whatever years past we may be remembering, it's important to be self-aware of the limits of one's own experience. My own white, U.S. background drew on a particular set of cultural references from *Gone with the Wind* to the Flintstones. I have happy memories of watching both of these with my family. Indeed, nostalgia can help us reconnect with powerful happy memories of the past that remind us of the life we've lived. But to stay within these insular cultural loops risks missing so much. We must not forget how nostalgia can also be an ear worm that repeats a narrative about a past that is impartial or just plain wrong.

Part Three: The Creativity of Nostalgia

I understand nostalgia as a kind of "Both-and." It is *both* a gift of connecting us to happy moments in our life *and* a dangerous earworm that crowds out alternative understandings and additional knowledge about the past.

Like so much of life, nostalgia is not a simple, single thing. It is "both-and."

Living with "both-and" requires an ability to hold some tension between competing and different ways of understanding. How can it be both? Was it the best of times or the worst of times?!?

And while sometimes there is no choice but to live in the tension of a "both-and", sometimes there is also the chance that something new may emerge in this tension. Something like Hegel's dialetic thinking with a thesis and antithesis giving way to a synthesis.

With nostalgia, the synthesis between the happy connections and the dangerous, deafening earworm may be an understanding of the past that values its gifts while not looking away from its shadows. For example, the 1960's were both a time of great music like "The Sound of Silence" *and* a moment of civil strife as black Americans fought for greater equality and safety. The First Thanksgiving was a moment of celebrating a successful harvest *and* the sorrowful beginning of a settler colonialism that would lead to the removal of Native peoples from their lands and enormous losses of life.

We live within the tension of "both-and", a world that on the whole is not as simple as our nostalgic memories would lull us to believe. Choosing to seek out the whole picture of the past can help us to better understand the stories and experiences of others—especially those whose lives may have been very different than our own for any number of reasons—age, gender, race, location.

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At the same time, our own nostalgic memories may remind us of what is truly good. Maybe the rose-colored glasses help us to forget the petty grievances and annoyances of life so that the basic goodness of life shines through. Being able to see the simple pleasures and happy moments that make up our connections to the past may teach us to see more of these simple pleasures in the present.

The creativity of nostalgia emerges when we can hold on to *both* the important of knowing what is good in life *and* retain an openness to learning more about other's experiences as well as from our own varied experiences of life. By living in the tension of all that is good and the injustices and heartbreaks of life, we can live more fully and be more authentically connected to others in our shared world.

So may it be.
Amen.

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