

The great power of nostalgia

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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My daughter and I were listening to the radio, when the prerecorded radio show commercial butted in to say, “We only play NEW music.”

And I thought, *How strange. Because there’s a lot of good music in the world. And older music is better.* I like new music, but I don’t mind mixing it up with some Indigo Girls, Nirvana, Stevie Wonder, or Joni Mitchell. The melodies are packed with bright days in the Florida sun, the smell of salt water, and the rumble of constant waves. The notes transport me to riding in a car with friends (with no grown up in sight), moving to new towns, and knowing that my life was full of possibilities. They remind me of beautiful sunrises over the ocean and nights of fishing on rocky cliffs.

Back then, I wasn’t worried about how to pay the bills or if we would ever have enough money for retirement. I didn’t worry if 90 days of 90-degree weather was about global warming. Even my sense of humor was different back then. I was funnier and smarter. There was an edge, but more creativity and playfulness. The music reminded me that it was all blurry joy back in the day.

Then I realized it. **I had been caught by the power of nostalgia.** Of course I didn’t have the angst of bills and global warming, but I had plenty of other worries. Faux concerns about popularity and real fear about my father’s violence in our home. Yet, somehow the notes and beats erase the dark realities and call out these shiny memories

We see the power of nostalgia churning all around us. In many ways, it can work to our advantage. For instance, scientists say that [we should spend money on experiences rather than stuff](#). Because even though it was 95 degrees that day at Disney World, you spent an accumulated 10 hours waiting in line for a mere one hour of actual rides, and you spent \$75 on a family meal that consisted of fast food that most McDonald’s restaurants would be embarrassed to serve, you will only remember the happy moments. You’ll recall when your daughter sees the castle and

squeals with unbearable delight or when she sees the actress playing Snow White and her eyes widen as if she met Kate Middleton. While the stuff collects dust and depreciates in actual value, the memories get shinier and more precious.

In our churches, people long for the time when going to church was the center of a town's social life. Mothers got to dress up after a week of housecleaning, fathers made professional connections, and teens met the people they would soon marry. The sanctuary was full, and everyone understood the importance of Sunday school.

In our politics, Donald Trump longs to "make America great again." He conjures up an illusion that if only we could go back in time, everything will be better. (In the latest stunning nostalgic move, an Ohio campaign manager said that there was no racism before Obama!)

The power of nostalgia is so strong, that when the **people of Israel** gained freedom and liberation, they longed to go back to Egypt. Can you imagine? They longed to return to a place where their children would be enslaved and beaten.

Thank God, **the clock only runs one way**. Because our crime rates have gone down, our young people are engaged with less drug abuse, and teen pregnancies are lower. The divorce rate has gone down and there is more support for women who are victims of domestic violence. Women can be doctors, lawyers, pastors, and maybe even presidents. Thank God, chemical companies cannot dump toxins into our waters without any censure. Thank God for marriage equality, and for the fact that people in loving relationships can now visit one another in the hospital and be covered by one another's insurance. Thank God we now have the technology to prove what was happening to African Americans when they got stopped for a broken tail light. Thank God, we have social media that forces us to hear the voices of those long-silenced.

I know that we have significant problems that we have to overcome—mass incarceration, systemic racism, and the unbelievable tax system that allows billionaires to go without paying taxes. The greedy line their full pockets with the money that should be going to our school teachers and roads. I know that there is an intricate system of fines, gerrymandering, and gender discrimination that does not allow poor people to escape from poverty. But the only way to fix those things is to keep moving forward and keep our eyes on the horizon.

What if the people of Israel had gone back to Egypt? What if they would have chosen slavery over liberation? It would have been very easy for them to allow the lure of memory to overcome the promise of milk and honey. But they did not go back. And neither can we. We need to keep pressing forward, being clear-eyed about our issues and utterly hopeful of that milk and honey. It's right on the horizon.