

How Would Our Ancestors View the 21st Century?

What is the worst thing about living near an open sewer? It is not that you sicken at the stench of it every time you leave your front door. It is that the noisome vapors are so pervasive, and you have lived with them so long, you no longer notice it. What is the worst thing about living in the rubble of a civilization? It is not that you shed a tear for the noble churches and courts and town halls you once knew, as you recall years filled with religious services, parades, block parties, and all the bumptious folderol of an ordinary civic life. It is that you do not even suspect that such things existed.

But how would it be if a time traveler were to go back behind the upheaval and let the people glance into the future? It's a feature of the American narrative that in all respects things improve over time, so that you can point to vaccines that have eliminated such dreaded diseases as polio and tuberculosis, or to ribbons of highways that bind up the country, or to the machine on which I am writing this essay now—the computer that puts in my grasp a vast library of human knowledge.

Our time traveler reveals these things, and the eyes of his audience grow glassy with wonder. Imagine—the poems of Tennyson, a few seconds away! The Dorsey band in person, Van Cliburn on the piano, Heifetz on the violin, Rembrandt in bold color, great things for everyone and not only for the rich who can travel. But then you will have to explain. No, a thousand to one, ten thousand to one, the people who use the instrument will be gazing at pornography rather than at the Masters. Then you will have to explain the term “pornography:” smut. And say that most high school students will never have heard of Tennyson, much less read his poems, but that almost all of them will have gazed at smut, some of them day after day.

The faces of the audience darken. Then, one among them, wiser than the rest, asks the obvious question: "How then shall we live?"

There is a country road that straggles its way over a mountain nearby. Lovers go there and pull over at a lookout, where they listen to music and engage in what's called "necking." It never goes beyond that because most of them are pretty good kids and understand that bearing children is for marriage and so is the child-making thing. That understanding allows them to be there in the first place. Innocence—even such compromised and sometimes failing innocence as we possess in a healthy culture—makes for freedom. You will have to tell the audience that there is no necking anymore. You will tell them that, as a rule, it is either sex or nothing. For the worst or the weakest among us, then, there is danger and heartbreak and, eventually, the protective callus of nihilism—even the shedding of blood. For the purest among us, and the most responsible, there is loneliness.

They have dances all the time, don't they? Merry things that bring out young people in flocks, chaperoned by their elders, who usually partake in the dancing too, since music and dance are shared by all. Hardly a week goes by without a big dance somewhere. You will tell them that that's all gone. You will tell them that the older generation feels absolutely no duty to bring young people together in a healthy and decent way. They are too busy engaging in their own debauches or they are simply alienated. They wouldn't know where to begin.

"Where is the sweetness of young love?" they ask you. "Don't people get married anymore?" You point their attention to their streets. There are families in every house. Sometimes it's a grandmother and grandfather whose children have moved "away," to the next block over, or across town, or, since this is America, to the neighboring county. Otherwise, it's a mother and father with children, and the children are everywhere. If the weather is fair, you can hear the music of

their games. A boy covers his eyes with his hands and leans against a telephone pole, counting down from 100 by fives, till he cries out, "Ready or not, here I come!" Or is that a ball that's scooting through the "outfield," down the pavement, while the kids cry, "Go, go, go"? What crime can such a place fear, when the streets and alleyways and backyards and porches are governed by spies more restless than any the CIA have ever trained, not to mention their grandmothers rocking on their porches and chatting with one another? Tell them that that is gone.

Tell them that a majority of the houses have no children in them. Tell them that this house here has a married couple who have no children because they don't want any. Tell them that in these houses some people are shacking up. Tell them that a single woman has bought that house. Tell them that two men live in that other one. Tell them that youth is spent not thinking about marriage and then being married, nor even thinking about love and being in love, but thinking about money, college, career, and sex. Tell them that because of these habits, the houses grow more and more expensive because more and more "households" are chasing them—households that are not households really, but atoms of self-fashioning.

Tell them that there are, by far, more women in the workplace than ever before and that they are respected lawyers, doctors, college professors, and career politicians. Tell them that we have cracked the back of public racism so that there are no more segregated hotels or restaurants or schools or businesses. Tell them also that there are by far more women living alone than ever before. Tell them about "trigger warnings" and anti-depressant drugs and boys who are persuaded by their mothers that they are "really" girls and that they want to have their genitals cut off. Tell them that nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. Tell them that far more than half of long sexual liaisons end in "divorce." Tell them that three out of four black children in America are born out

of wedlock. Tell them that one out of three young black men will spend time in prison.

Then there are things you can't tell at all because words would not suffice, or because any attempt on your part to describe them would be met with blank incomprehension or disbelief. So you will have to show them. Bring a single copy of a women's magazine chosen at random. Bring a copy of *Men's Health*. Bring pictures from a Gay Pride parade. Bring a five-minute clip of a television "comedy," again chosen at random. Bring the sex education curriculum for fifth graders in a school district in the United States or Canada. Go to the Young Adult Fiction stacks at your local library, shut your eyes, and bring the first book your hand grasps.

Bring a five-minute clip of *The View*, or of a public high school cafeteria at lunchtime. Bring a typical video game. Bring photographs of the interior of their churches during services, or of the parking lot where the church used to be. Bring a copy of one of the "art" weeklies in their metropolitan area, and be sure it features the advice column of Dan Savage or the personal ads.

Go to what was once an ethnic neighborhood in an old city and take pictures, plenty of pictures, of gang graffiti, "gentrified" homes turned into law offices, and alleys empty of children. Bring a picture of the security guard posted at a local high school.

Try to explain that some people want to let confused boys strip and shower in a girls' locker room. Try to explain same-sex marriage. Try to explain that women are going to be sent to the front lines. Try to explain the fifty or some odd "genders," two of them genders and the rest of them odd. Try to explain that everything they take for granted about the role of religion in public life is abominated. Try to explain the new meaning of "theocratic."

Bring an ultrasound picture of a child in the womb. Try to explain that the same people who have seen these wondrous pictures believe in the right to cut that child to ribbons, as the fail-safe for fornication or careerism. Try to explain the Belgian Quik-Mart Suicide vans. Try to explain that syphilis and gonorrhea have recruited about thirty more diseases to join their ranks. Try to explain why teenage girls are prone to gonorrhea of the throat. Try to explain “feminism” and why it champions that same “empowerment” of the girls, with the concomitant corruption of the boys. Try to explain why church after church fell to the sibilant seducer of the age, who was “a murderer from the beginning,” and “a liar and the father of lies.” Place a photograph of an episcopal pederast or protector of pederasts beside a photograph of Fulton Sheen, and try to explain why the former was a media darling, but the latter an object of posthumous scorn.

Take an old prayer book and a pair of scissors and cut from the book every prayer that has been dismissed or forgotten. Take an old hymnal and cut from it every song that was meant to stir the heart of the Christian soldier. Take an old Catholic calendar and black out every feast that has been defeated. Take a photograph of the interior of a Catholic church and white out with acid every work of art that has been whitewashed or reduced to splinters and rubble.

Fall to your knees and beg forgiveness. Then get back in your time machine, return to the present, and begin the long slow process of restoration.

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