

The Zone of Adulthood

Like some of you, I suffer from insomnia. Try as I might, sometimes I just can't close the deal when I put head to pillow. It started in my teens; I would take a walk or swim in an effort to get tired out enough for sleep. But the passage of time has granted me another remedy as close as my phone: old television.

The familiar and comforting aspect of watching old shows from my childhood generally does the trick. In binge-watching one show, however, I've noticed something stark—not that I haven't noticed it in other aspects of culture when contrasted with early 1960s—it's just more evident here. What I've noticed is that we used to define adulthood as coming to accept that mankind's negative traits can be ameliorated, but not completely eradicated. Further we used to understand the dangers of conformity. Today it feels like 500 years have passed, not just 50. That's how great the difference in common knowledge seems between that time and today.

The show? One you know. One I will submit for your approval: [Rod Serling's "The Twilight Zone."](#)

Three episodes from the first season stand out: "Walking Distance" (my favorite of all episodes in the series), "I Shot an Arrow into the Air," and "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street."

From Innocent Joy to Duty and Responsibility

"Walking Distance" tells the story of Martin Sloan, a burned out Madison Avenue ad exec in 1959. (Think of the later Don Draper—more on that in a bit.) He returns to his childhood hometown of the late 1930s to recalibrate, to try and feel serenity again as opposed to his frenetic life in Gotham. His car breaks down outside of town and he walks the distance to it after leaving the vehicle at a service station for repair.

But as happened regularly with Serling, the walking distance between the station and town takes him through the twilight zone.

He enters the town not in 1959, but transported back to his carefree days of 1938, and encounters his eleven year old self. As he tries to talk to his younger version to impart wisdom, the boy runs away. Sloan visits his mother and father, who have no idea who the strange man is now claiming to be the grown up version of their son. He again encounters the boy, who he weirdly chases through a merry go round until the boy falls off, permanently injuring his leg. After the incident, and here's the key, Sloan's father finds him, figuring out who he is. Sloan wishes he could forever remain in the warm summer night of 1938. But his dad understands that childhood happens only once. After its innocent joys, one must embrace the duties of adulthood. Sloan reluctantly agrees, acknowledges his maturity, and walks back to the service station. The episode finishes with Sloan riding confidently back to Manhattan. Back to his adult life. [Gig Young](#) stars as Martin Sloan.

This was filmed before the counterculture of the 1960s turned the tables. Since then the alleged wisdom of youth has been in the ascendant. Adults are money-grubbing racist, sexist, robots whose experience is to be shunned while we are encouraged instead to adopt the supposed earnest authenticity of never-ending adolescent angst. It gave us a world run by [Holden Caulfields](#), as the student rioters of the '60s have long held the cultural levers of American society without ever growing up in any emotional or intellectual sense.

In an updated version, Sloan would barge his way into the basement of his boyhood home, insist he is entitled to the space, and make camp awaiting the advent of the internet. In 2019, the acceptance of the compromises, responsibilities, and challenges of living as a grown up are tossed aside by the phenomenon of 30 year olds living in their parent's home and

behaving like teenagers with ATM cards. It is reflected in the politics of the age as well, as veritable children like AOC are actually taken seriously by many in the nation. We have regressed to political and cultural thumb sucking. It does not bode well.

Is this only the fault of the teenage miscreants? No. Just as the seeming failure of Brexit is in great degree due to the Tory Party installing a Remainer as the Prime Minister of a government committed to the U.K. leaving the EU, the rise of the Bratty Brigade is due in large part to the abrogation of adult responsibility by their elders in the first place.

When student agitators disrupted a class, damaged school property, or occupied a dean's office, if they had been forcibly removed and then expelled, it would have sent a message to students and administrators alike: Sorry, toddlers, the grownups are still in charge. Aside from Ronald Reagan as governor of California and [S. I. Hayakawa](#) as president of San Francisco State University, that was a message the adults of the time were rarely willing to send. Thus, the petulant little vermin ran amok to infect the vast majority of academia and the rest of society well into the future.

As a side note, the themes, characters, and even terms from the "Walking Distance" episode were lifted wholesale in the [brilliant Don Draper Kodak Carousel pitch from "Mad Men."](#)

A Thin Veneer of Civilization

In "I Shot an Arrow into the Air," Serling engages in what would become a familiar trope to viewers; that if any wayfarer is lost or on the way to another planet, they were really on or headed to Earth the whole time. He does this so consistently you can set your watch by it.

This story deals with three marooned astronauts who believe they have crashed landed somewhere in deep outer space. We assume by the standards of the time that they are highly

trained and disciplined military officers. Nevertheless, one of them repeatedly breaks the chain of command and then kills his commander and crewmate so he can survive by using their scant resources for himself. As he then ascends over a cliff to survey the terrain, he finds they had landed in . . . Nevada. [Ed Binns](#) stars as the commanding officer.

What I think we see showcased here, as in [The Lord of the Flies](#), is that when put in severe situations, it is easy and probable that certain people will throw off the thin veneer of civilization and behave like ravaging beasts, murdering and taking advantage of others for their own benefit. That, Serling knew, is a constant. It is the human condition. This is a far cry from the perfectibility of mankind ethos that underlies the modern welfare state and incipient American socialism. A tweak there and an adjustment here and man will reach social paradise. We can [immanentize the eschaton](#).

But perhaps because Serling's generation had been through the Great Depression, World War II, Korea, and was on the cusp of Vietnam, they full well understood the evil man would always be capable of committing. Today though, the facts and conclusions of history have been replaced with a never-ending litany of agitprop designed to instill a sado-narcissism, a sense of greatly elevated personal status earned by brutishly punishing your heritage, your nation, your very being. It is making common cause with those who would put you in peril. It is Stockholm Syndrome gone even more mad.

We've Seen the Enemy . . .

Finally, in "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street," mindless conformity is the subject, as aliens slightly alter the power grid on a typical American suburban street to watch the total violent mayhem that takes places as the residents turn on each other looking for the culprit who is causing the power fluctuation. It is 1959, so flying saucers are quite on the mind. Once the villains are deduced with the help of a kid with a bad haircut, the hunt is on for the alien

collaborators.

The episode ends with the aliens commenting to each other how easy it was to drive the earthlings to self-destruction. Seems silly. But it is presented well. [Claude Akins](#) stars.

It was no doubt meant to be an indictment of conformist McCarthyism, as Serling was a liberal in his day—which, of course, would make him a solid conservative today. But in modern translation watching the neighbors on the street crazily betray and prey on each other to discover who is working with the aliens does not conjure up visions of wild-eyed House Un-American Activities Commission committee members. Instead, the story reminds us of the insane conspiracies of collusion and the ideological lockstep and party conformity (known today in the neo-Orwellian term “message discipline”) that engulfs one of our major parties. It is enough to throw small bait to the mind of those disposed to bite and turn them into salivating wolves, ready to persecute and even kill those who do not conform or agree. These residents of Maple Street would find a fine home in most gender studies departments today, not to mention the Democratic Caucus of both houses of Congress. And the rounding up of the enemy collaborators? Well, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has got that covered with her now notorious “I’m keeping a list” line.

The purblind longing for delayed or denied adulthood, the delicate boundary between civilization and barbarism, and the mad power of leftist conformity, are all things that came to pass and replace normal discourse as the warped ideals of the vicious childlike late '60s counterculture captured the previously adult culture.

Though it was mistaken in many respects, Serling’s vivid imagination must have looked upon the dissolution of muscular and sane Cold War liberalism as the years passed and despaired the the weak shadow it cast. For both he and his country, a

country he had served in uniform, a more nightmarish dreamscape was hard to imagine.

Even in “The Twilight Zone.”

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