From Netflix to Nintendo, Nostalgia Sells

In 2016, the Netflix hit series *Stranger Things* won praise not only for its precocious cast and sci-fi storytelling but also for the way it harkened back to the coming-of-age movies of the 1980s. “It’s one thing to set a TV series in the 1980s,” Sam Adams wrote for *Rolling Stone*, but “it’s a whole other thing . . . to make it feel like it was actually shot during the Reagan-and-Rubik’s-Cube era.” Even the show’s plot and pacing pay intentional homage to highly regarded ’80s movies like *The Goonies*, *Stand by Me*, and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. “For those who grew up in the era,” writes Will Nicol on Digital Trends, “the nostalgia is almost tangible.”

In recent years, many movies have also been revisiting older films and TV shows. This year alone has already seen a live-action *Beauty and the Beast* based on the 1991 animated original, a comedy send-up of TV show *Baywatch*, and a sequel to 1982’s *Blade Runner*. Interestingly, the second season of *Stranger Things*, set in 1984, opens with the characters trick-or-treating as the characters from *Ghostbusters*, another popular ’80s movie that was remade just last year.

Elsewhere in entertainment, video game maker Nintendo has had trouble meeting demand for its Super Nintendo Entertainment System Classic Edition, which reportedly “has the original look and feel of the ’90s home console, only smaller.” “The wild success of the SNES Classic is the latest evidence of rampant affection for the 1990s,” journalist David Sims concludes. “It’s the childhood of many a 20- or 30-something wrapped into a convenient little package.”
The past—packaged and priced—is a big seller, but nostalgia is nothing new. Longing for our past, or at least some aspects of it, has pulled at us all to one degree or another no matter what decade we grew up in. Nostalgia also crosses cultural boundaries. Dr. Tim Wildschut told *The New York Times*, “The defining features of nostalgia in England”—warm memories with oneself at the center, usually among friends—“are also the defining features in Africa and South America.”

**REFLECT:**
- What other examples of nostalgia in current popular culture are you aware of?
- On a scale of 1 (hardly ever) to 5 (all the time), how frequently would you say you feel nostalgic? Why?
- How surprised are you to learn that the “defining features” of nostalgia stay the same across cultures? Why?

**The Science of Nostalgia**

In 1688, Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer invented the word *nostalgia*—from the Greek *nóstos*, “return,” and *álgos*, “pain”—to describe how Swiss mercenaries fighting in other European countries behaved. A report in *Scientific American Mind* explains, “These soldiers were reportedly plagued by an obsessive longing for their homeland, which manifested itself in hysterical fits of crying, anxiety, heart palpitations, diminished appetite and insomnia.” They felt real pain because they wanted to return home.

“Today,” Dr. Neel Burton writes for *Psychology Today*, “nostalgia is no longer looked upon as a mental disorder, but as a natural, common, and even positive emotion, a vehicle for travelling beyond the deadening confines of time and space.” Sensory stimuli can trigger nostalgic feelings—anything from hearing a song popular in your youth to smelling food you associate with a specific time or person to strolling through “old stomping grounds” to browsing a family photo album.

Researchers also distinguish between nostalgia and homesickness. Whereas homesickness generally produces sadness, nostalgia generally produces positive emotions. “When nostalgia is induced in the lab,” Dr. Clay Routledge notes, “it puts people in a good mood.”

Why? Because nostalgia stimulates blood flow and metabolic activity in the brain’s pleasure centers, “rewarding” them. Mark Joseph Stern notes in *Slate* that nostalgia produces “neurochemical bliss, flooding

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**Core Bible Passages**

In **Isaiah 43:14-20**, God, through Isaiah, speaks to the Jews living in exile in Babylon. Around 537 BC, Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated the Babylonians (or Chaldeans), granting conquered peoples the freedom to return home. Isaiah says God is using Cyrus to initiate a new exodus, but then promises that the return to the Promised Land will be greater than the original exodus, so much so that God tells the exiles to forget “ancient history” (*verse 18*). God’s past saving acts become prelude to the salvation God will yet bring.

The “roll call” of the faithful in **Hebrews 11** suggests God’s people can experience a “nostalgia” for the future. The author says our forebears in faith “confessed that they were strangers and immigrants on earth” (*verse 13*). This language reminds us of the Swiss mercenaries who missed their homeland so much that they agonized over it. However, the heroes of faith weren’t looking backward to their earthly homeland but forward to the heavenly one God had prepared. The more we align ourselves with God, the less “at home” we will feel in this world, and the more we can work to transform it as we act out of longing for our true home.

**REFLECT:**
- How does remembering what God has done train us to recognize what God is doing now?
- When does excessive attention to God’s past action keep us from following God into a new future?
- Which of the people in Hebrews 11 inspires or encourages you most in your faith, and why?
- How do you show your longing for the home God has prepared as you live in this world?
Nostalgia Marketing

Evoking nostalgia weakens people’s grip on their wallets. At least, that’s the conclusion of a 2014 study in the Journal of Consumer Research. The authors conducted six experiments. In one, people thinking about the past proved willing to pay more for products than those thinking about the future. In another, people who were feeling nostalgic proved more willing to donate money than those who weren’t.

The application for advertisers is clear: Savvy marketers tap into the selling power of nostalgia. “Products, formats and color combinations that agencies and companies alike haven’t dared to touch in decades are suddenly back in style,” according to one Forbes blogger. Nostalgia-driven campaigns in recent years have included KFC’s “resurrection” of Colonel Harland Sanders after two decades, Adobe’s ads imagining how PBS painting guru Bob Ross might have used Photoshop, and streaming music service Spotify’s campaign based around the 1984 fantasy film The NeverEnding Story.

While nostalgia marketing exists to make money, it might also encourage connections between different generations. Writing for Shutterstock’s blog, Alexander Huls notes, “Nostalgia has always been a transferable emotion. . . . When we see something that brings us back, we’re inclined to turn to someone we know and say, ‘Oh man, remember that?’ . . . Appeal to someone’s existing love for something, and they’re likely to share it—whether it’s with a post on Facebook, or introducing your kid to Saved by the Bell. That’s a powerful thing, and it’s exactly why nostalgia marketing works so well.”

REFLECT:
• How have you seen nostalgia used in advertising recently?
• To what degree does nostalgia marketing make you pay attention to, or even spend money on, a product or service?

Benefits of Nostalgia

I asked novelist Jeffry W. Johnston, a fellow fan of Stranger Things, whether nostalgia plays a part in his excitement for the show. He says it doesn’t, but he’s sure “for some there is a nostalgia factor that connects back to the films of Spielberg in the ’80s. People like to be reminded of the ‘good times.’ For the writer or filmmaker who does it well, it can be very powerful.”

The artistic power of nostalgia parallels its demonstrated psychological benefits. Routledge points out that nostalgia usually “increases self-esteem” and “promotes the feeling that life is full of meaning and purpose.” Our nostalgic reveries often follow what social psychologists Jochen Gebauer and Constantine Sedikides call a “redemption theme . . . a story line that begins with a bad experience out of which something good ensues.” When we remember these positive outcomes from the past, we reinforce the expectation that they will occur again. This dynamic explains why we often feel nostalgic when we’re initially feeling sad. Gebauer and Sedikides compare nostalgia to “armor shielding the mind . . . against psychological onslaughts in the future.”

Nostalgia can also reinforce a sense of belonging. Gebauer and Sedikides’s research found that it has a “social-glue effect.” People who were feeling nostalgic scored higher in self-assessments of their ability to build relationships, share feelings openly with others, and lend emotional support to friends.

REFLECT:
• What is the most powerful experience of nostalgia you remember having?
All Saints’ Day

Many Christian congregations observe the Festival of All Saints today (or did so on the actual date, November 1). As Laurence Hull Stookey explains in his book Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church, All Saints’ Day evolved because the church, after “widespread persecution in the early centuries,” ran out of dates on which to honor martyrs. All Saints’ Day is “a day on which to commemorate all the saints who cannot be accorded their own specific dates, and whose names have often been forgotten.”

The Roman Catholic Church reserves November 1 for remembering all whom it has canonized as saints and November 2, All Souls’ Day, for commemorating all the deceased faithful. “Protestants,” Stookey notes, “have collapsed the occasions into one.” In both cases, All Saints highlights the power of memory in Christian faith, as we remember those whom Hebrews calls “a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (12:1).

How do we keep All Saints’ Day from becoming an exercise in sentimentality and nostalgia? By maintaining the focus urged by the author of Hebrews and fixing “our eyes on Jesus, faith’s pioneer” (12:2). Those who have gone before us aren’t intended to occupy our full attention. Instead, they’re the ones who have “fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7) and who now cheer us on as we strive to live as Jesus’ faithful followers, even as they did.

REFLECT:
- Name some saints you’ve known whom you remember with thanks.
- How specifically does their example help you to fix your eyes on Jesus?

Dangers of Nostalgia

Although nostalgia is universal, nostalgic affection for any given subject is not. Johnston told me, “Any artist who makes a conscious choice to create nostalgia” runs a risk because “what creates a sense of nostalgia for one person may be viewed in a negative way by another.”

Nostalgia is selective memory. “Good old days” were never completely good, nor were they good for everyone. Ryan Britt makes this point in his book of essays, Luke Skywalker Can’t Read: And Other Geeky Truths, by discussing the Back to the Future movies (1985–1990). In the first movie of the series, the main character travels back to 1955. However, as Britt observes, that 1955 contains almost no black characters. The ones it does contain “are required to ‘dream big,’ rather than actually live big.” “Anyone who’s read any history,” writes Britt, “is aware that America in 1955 was worse for blacks than it was in 1985, but the 1955 [depicted in the films] is super-rosy.” Britt loves these movies but argues they contain “revisionism that makes white people feel better about the past. This is fake nostalgia for something the (white) target audience didn’t experience—in the case of racial equity, because it didn’t exist.” Nostalgia for the past can make us forget, overlook, or excuse its flaws and failings.

The same features that make nostalgia psychologically effective also make it potentially addictive. “A person can become addicted to any activity that stimulates the reward centers of the brain,” writes Dr. Heidi Moawad. “Nostalgia can be used excessively as a crutch and the positive feelings of nostalgia may serve as a substitute for living in the present.”

REFLECT:
- How do you respond to Britt’s comments about “fake nostalgia” in movies? Name some other examples of this sort of “revisionist” nostalgia.
- When, if ever, have you felt the temptation to dwell in the past instead of facing the present?
Nostalgia vs. Christian Memory

Memory is integral to Christian faith. God has always called God’s people to remember their past. We remember God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah, and we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus. Reading and teaching Scripture, celebrating the sacraments, observing the Christian Year—these are some ways we remember how God has been at work in the past, shaping our history and the history of our community along our own kind of “redemptive theme.”

But Christian memory isn’t meant to be nostalgic. We look to the past in order to help us discern what God is doing in the present and where God wants to lead us in the future. Whenever our memories of the past make yesterday seem more attractive than today or tomorrow, whenever nostalgia threatens to keep us from moving forward as followers of Jesus or growing into the people God created us to be, that’s when God tells us, “Don’t remember the prior things; don’t ponder ancient history. Look! I’m doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don’t you recognize it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

REFLECT:
• How does your faith community remember the past while avoiding the pitfalls of nostalgia?
• What lessons has your faith community drawn from the past for its present and future?

United Methodist Perspective

While it remains the third largest religious body in the United States, The United Methodist Church, like other mainline Protestant denominations, has been wrestling with declining membership and worship attendance. According to Pew Research, although roughly 70 percent of Americans “continue to identify with some branch of the Christian faith,” fewer and fewer are mainline Protestants (14.7 percent in 2014).

Dr. Donald Haynes, a United Methodist elder and Hood Theological Seminary professor, challenges United Methodists to face another statistic: While 62 percent of Americans have a favorable impression of The United Methodist Church, 16 percent “have no opinion at all” about it. “We have 37,000 churches in the United States and 16 percent of the people do not know we are here!” he says. “People have nothing against us but little interest in us. Have we become part of nostalgic Americana like the white clapboard churches on every New England village green? Many of those have paint peeling from the steeples, empty pews on Sunday mornings and little influence in the village where they were once the dominant cultural influence. Is that our destiny?”

Haynes believes it need not be. He looks to 19th-century American Methodism for inspiration: “Methodism began with disenchanted, dislocated people seeking ‘spiritual footage.’ That is the major spiritual and psychological need of people in our own time.”

REFLECT:
• Does your congregation look back with nostalgia to a time when it was a “dominant cultural influence”? How do they view the past?
• How do you think United Methodism (and/or mainline Protestantism) must change to meet the challenges of ministering in the United States today?

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Helpful Links
• “‘Stranger Things’: How Netflix’s Retro Hit Resurrects the Eighties” — http://tiny.cc/8wghoy

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Leader Helps

• Keep in mind your group members and available time as you choose activities for this session.

• Have smartphones or other devices that can access the Internet available for your group. Invite participants to bring their own devices to the session.

• Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard (or a large sheet of paper) and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.

• Open the session with the following prayer or one of your own:

  God of the past and the future, of all times and all places, you call us to live in this moment, in this place, as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Guide our reading, our listening, and our learning by your Holy Spirit, that we may truly discern how to do his will and share his love in our time. Amen.

• Before reading the main essay, lead a short brainstorming session asking participants to identify major points of nostalgia for the decade(s) in which they grew up. (For example: What are people nostalgic for from the 1940s? . . . the 1950s? . . . the 1960s? and so on.) Write down responses, then have participants vote on a group list of “The Top Three Nostalgic Subjects of All Time.”

• Read or review highlights of each section of the main essay and the sidebars. Use your choice of questions from the REFLECT sections to stimulate discussion.

• Have a Bible study. Ask the group to form teams of two or three to read the “Core Bible Passages” and reflect on the questions. Then have teams share highlights from their discussions with the reassembled group.

• For a final reflection, draw a line on the markerboard or large sheet of paper, and have participants help you fill in a timeline of your congregation’s history. Encourage participants to list all the events that matter most to them, whether they inspire nostalgic feelings or not. After 5–10 minutes to complete the timelines, discuss these questions: Which of these events do you think our congregation does feel or might be tempted to feel nostalgic about? Which events do you think a purely nostalgic memory of our history would have omitted? What lessons from our congregation’s past do you think God is calling us to heed as we move forward into the future? How will we apply those lessons?

• Close the session with the following prayer or one of your own:

  Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, keep us faithful to you this day and all days, remembering always your faithfulness to us and rejoicing always in the hope you give. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

• Sing or read aloud together one of these hymns or another you think appropriate for the session theme: “Lord of Our Growing Years” (David Mowbray, 1982; http://tiny.cc/b3lhoy), “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” (Isaac Watts, 1719; http://tiny.cc/q3lhoy), “This Is a Day of New Beginnings” (Brian Wren, 1978; http://tiny.cc/53lhoy).

• Watch Clay Routledge’s TED-Ed video “Why Do We Feel Nostalgia?” (http://tiny.cc/4zlhoy) for an overview of the science of nostalgia.

Next Week in Sexual Harassment and Assault

The recent revelations about movie producer Harvey Weinstein have sparked a national conversation about sexual harassment and assault. Many women have spoken up publicly about their experiences. How does our faith guide us to listen and to respond? How can the church be a place of healing for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment and assault?

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