LEARNING FROM THE FIFTIES

Contemplating the turmoil and stress of the last three-and-a-half decades, many Americans idealize the easeful golden days of the 1950s. But as our author shows, the price of security and community may be higher than most Americans are now willing to pay.

BY ALAN EHRENHALT

Most of us in America believe a few simple propositions that seem so clear and self-evident they scarcely need to be said. Choice is a good thing in life, and the more of it we have, the happier we are. Authority is inherently suspect; nobody should have the right to tell others what to think or how to behave. Sin isn't personal, it's social; individual human beings are creatures of the society they live in.

Those ideas are the manifesto of an entire generation in America, the generation born in the baby boom years and now in its thirties and forties. They are powerful ideas. They all have the ring of truth. But in the past quarter-century, taken to excess, they have landed us in a great deal of trouble.

The worship of choice has brought us a world in which nothing we choose seems good enough to be permanent, and we are unable to resist the endless pursuit of new selections—in work, in marriage, in front of the television set. The suspicion of authority has meant the erosion of standards of conduct and civility, visible most clearly in schools where teachers who dare to discipline pupils risk a profane response. The repudiation of sin has given us a collection of wrongdoers who insist that they are not responsible for their actions because they have been dealt bad cards in life. When we declare that there are no sinners, we are a step away from deciding that there is no such thing as right and wrong.

We have grown fond of the saying that there is no free lunch, but we forget that it applies to moral as well as economic matters. Stable relationships, civil classrooms, safe streets—the ingredients of what we call com-

munity—all come at a price. The price is rules, and people who can enforce them; limits on the choices we can make as individuals; and a willingness to accept the fact that there are bad people in the world, and sin in even the best of us. The price is not low, but the life it makes possible is no small achievement.

Not all that long ago in America, we understood the implicit bargain, and most of us were willing to pay the price. What was it really like to live under the terms of that bargain? Would we ever want to do so again?

In 1975, after a long but singularly uneventful career in Illinois politics, a round-faced Chicago tavern owner named John G. Fary was rewarded with a promotion to Congress. On the night of his election, at age 64, he announced his agenda for everyone to hear. "I will go to Washington to help represent Mayor Daley," he declared. "For 21 years, I represented the mayor in the legislature, and he was always right."

Richard J. Daley died the next year, but Fary soon discovered the same qualities of infallibility in Tip O'Neill, the Speaker of the House under whom he served. Over four congressional terms, Fary never cast a single vote against the Speaker's position on any issue of significance. From the leadership's point of view, he was an automatic yes.

And that, in a sense, was his undoing. Faced with a difficult primary challenge from an aggressive Chicago alderman, Fary had little to talk about other than his legendary willingness to do whatever he was told. The Chicago newspapers made sport of him. "Fary's lackluster record,"

one of them said, "forfeits his claim to a House seat." He was beaten badly and sent home to his tavern on the Southwest Side to ponder the troubling changes in modern political life.

It was not an easy thing for him to understand. The one principle John Fary had stood for during 30 years in politics—obedience—had come into obvious disrepute. The legislator who simply followed the rules as they came down to him invited open ridicule as a mindless hack.

No quality is less attractive in American politics these days than obedience—not foolishness or deceit or even blatant corruption. There is no one we are more scornful of than the office-holder who refuses to make choices for himself. There are bumper stickers all over Washington that say, in big block capital letters, QUESTION AUTHORITY. There are none that say LISTEN TO THE BOSS.

John Fary made a career out of listening to the boss. Of course, he didn't have much alternative. In the Chicago politics of the 1950s, you could either be part of the machine, and entertain a realistic hope of holding office, or be against it, and have virtually no hope at all. Fary actually began as something of an upstart. In 1951, he ran in the 12th Ward as a challenger to the Swinarski family, which more or less dominated ward politics in alliance with other machine lieutenants. After that unsuccessful campaign, however, Fary made his accommodations to the system; he had no other choice.

If Fary ever chafed at the rules of his constricted political world, he never did so in public. He seemed content voting with the leadership, gratified to be part of an ordered political system, content working behind the bar at his tavern when he was not practicing politics in Springfield or Washington. He didn't appear to give much thought to the possibilities of doing it any other way. When he achieved passage of the one notable legislative initiative of his long career, a state law legalizing bingo, he celebrated by inventing a new drink called "Bingo Bourbon" and serving it to his customers on the house.

In the years when John Fary was building a political career out of loyalty on the South Side of Chicago, Ernie Banks was making his baseball career on the North Side. From the day he joined the Chicago Cubs in the fall of 1953, Banks was special: skinny and not very powerful looking, he swung with his wrists and propelled line drives out of Wrigley Field with a speed that sometimes seemed hard to believe.

The 1950s were a time of glory for Ernie Banks—40 home runs year after year, two Most Valuable Player awards in a row, gushing praise on the sports page—and yet, in other ways, his rewards were meager. He played on a string of terrible Cubs teams, so he never came close to appearing in a World Series, and because the fans didn't buy many tickets,

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the Cubs weren't very generous about salaries. Compared with mediocre ballplayers today, Banks was woefully underpaid, even in the real-dollar terms of his time. In 1959, the year he recorded his second straight MVP season, the Cubs paid him $45,000.

But Banks never considered leaving the Cubs and going to another team. He couldn't, because he was not a free agent. The Cubs owned him, and according to the baseball rules of the 1950s, his only options were to accept the contract they offered him or leave baseball altogether. Like John Fary, he really didn't have any choice.

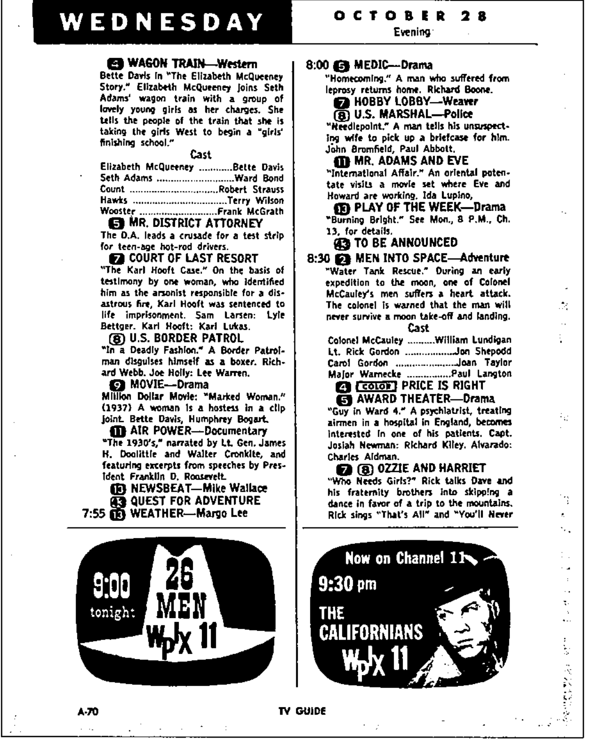
If Banks spent any time worrying about his limited choices, it didn't show. The Cubs were his team, they had lifted him out of the weedy fields of the Negro leagues, and he belonged with them. After a few years in Chicago, he became famous not only for his home runs but for his loyalty and enthusiasm. He loved to tell reporters about the "friendly confines" of Wrigley Field. Warming up before a doubleheader on a bright summer day, he would say two games weren't enough. "Let's play three!" Banks would exult.

What John Fary is to the present-day politician Ernie Banks is to the present-day ballplayer. You can compare him, for example, to Rickey Henderson, who in the last 15 years has stolen more bases than anyone in the history of the game. Henderson will be in the Hall of Fame someday, as Ernie Banks already is. Unlike Banks, however, he has been paid fabulous salaries, and the arrival of free agency has allowed him to jump from team to team in search of money and World Series appearances. And yet he has never seemed content with his situation. Everywhere he has played he has expressed his frustration with his contract, the team management, the fans, and even, sometimes, his own play. The market has made Rickey Henderson free, and it has made him rich. It just hasn't made him happy.

The differences between Ernie Banks and Rickey Henderson are, of course, partly a matter of temperament. Some people are content by nature, and some are restless. In another sense, though, the two ballplayers are a metaphor for the changes in American life over the past 40 years. We live today in a time of profuse choice, with all the opportunity and disillusionment that it brings. Ernie Banks and John Fary lived in a world where choice was much more limited—where those in authority made decisions that the free market now throws open to endless individual re-examination.

This observation applies not only to baseball and politics but to all of the important personal relationships in life. In an average year in the 1950s, the number of divorces in America was about 10 per 1,000 marriages—barely a third of what it was to become by 1980. This was not because divorce was impossible to obtain—although it was difficult in a few states—or because it made anyone an outcast in the community. It was because divorce was simply not on the menu of options for most people, no matter how difficult or stressful life might become. The couples of the 1950s got married on the assumption that it was their job to make things work the best way they could. Like Ernie Banks and John Fary, they played the hand they were dealt and refrained from agonizing over what might have been.

People just stayed married in the 1950s, to their spouses, to their political machines, to their baseball teams. Corporations also stayed married—to the communities they grew up with. Any one of a thousand examples could illustrate this point, but one will do: the story of the Lennox Corporation and its hometown, Marshalltown, Iowa.


WEDNESDAY — OCTOBER 28 — Evening

(4) WAGON TRAIN—Western
Bette Davis in "The Elizabeth McQueeney Story." Elizabeth McQueeney joins Seth Adams' wagon train with a group of lovely young girls as her charges. She tells the people of the train that she is taking the girls West to begin a "girls' finishing school."

Cast
Elizabeth McQueeney ....Bette Davis
Seth Adams ....Ward Bond
Count ....Robert Strauss
Hawks ....Terry Wilson
Wooster ....Frank McGrath

(5) MR. DISTRICT ATTORNEY
The D.A. leads a crusade for a test strip for teen-age hot-rod drivers.

(7) COURT OF LAST RESORT
"The Karl Hooft Case." On the basis of testimony by one woman, who identified him as the arsonist responsible for a disastrous fire, Karl Hooft was sentenced to life imprisonment. Sam Larsen: Lyle Bettger. Karl Hooft: Karl Lukas.

(8) U.S. BORDER PATROL
"In a Deadly Fashion." A Border Patrolman disguises himself as a boxer. Richard Webb. Joe Holly: Lee Warren.

(9) MOVIE—Drama
Million Dollar Movie: "Marked Woman." (1937) A woman is a hostess in a clip joint. Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart.

(11) AIR POWER—Documentary
"The 1930's," narrated by Lt. Gen. James H. Doolittle and Walter Cronkite, and featuring excerpts from speeches by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

(13) NEWSBEAT—Mike Wallace
(43) QUEST FOR ADVENTURE
7:55 (13) WEATHER—Margo Lee

8:00 (5) MEDIC—Drama
"Homecoming." A man who suffered from leprosy returns home. Richard Boone.

(7) HOBBY LOBBY—Weaver
(8) U.S. MARSHAL—Police
"Needlepoint." A man tells his unsuspecting wife to pick up a briefcase for him. John Bromfield, Paul Abbott.

(11) MR. ADAMS AND EVE
"International Affair." An oriental potentate visits a movie set where Eve and Howard are working. Ida Lupino,

(13) PLAY OF THE WEEK—Drama
"Burning Bright." See Mon., 8 P.M., Ch. 13, for details.

(43) TO BE ANNOUNCED

8:30 (2) MEN INTO SPACE—Adventure
"Water Tank Rescue." During an early expedition to the moon, one of Colonel McCauley's men suffers a heart attack. The colonel is warned that the man will never survive a moon take-off and landing.

Cast
Colonel McCauley ....William Lundigan
Lt. Rick Gordon ....Jon Shepodd
Carol Gordon ....Joan Taylor
Major Warnecke ....Paul Langton

(4) COLOR PRICE IS RIGHT
(5) AWARD THEATER—Drama
"Guy in Ward 4." A psychiatrist, treating airmen in a hospital in England, becomes interested in one of his patients. Capt. Josiah Newman: Richard Kiley. Alvarado: Charles Aldman.

(7) (8) OZZIE AND HARRIET
"Who Needs Girls?" Rick talks Dave and his fraternity brothers into skipping a dance in favor of a trip to the mountains. Rick sings "That's All" and "You'll Never

A-70 TV GUIDE

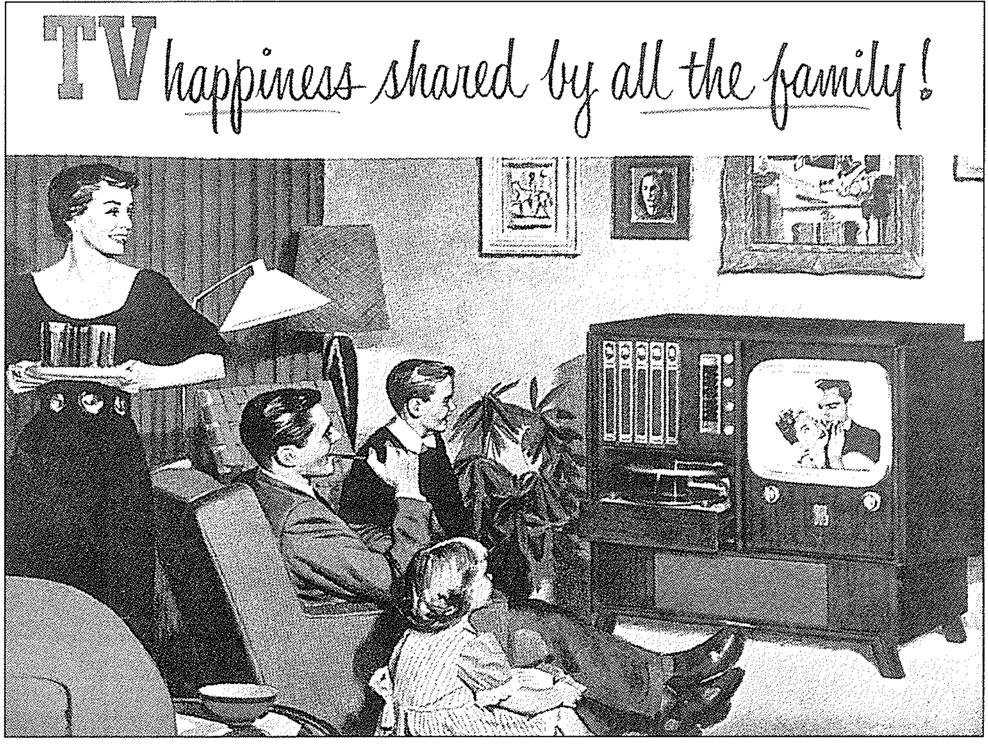
In 1895, David Lennox invented a new kind of steel furnace and set up in business making them in Marshalltown. As the years went by, his company prospered as a manufacturer of boilers, and later, air conditioners. The Lennox Corporation became a reliable source of respectable factory jobs that enabled generations of blue-collar families to enjoy the comforts of middle-class life. Its managers helped with countless local fairs, fund drives, and school-building campaigns.

Lennox probably could have improved its profit margins in the 1950s by moving to a place where labor was cheaper, but its leadership never thought of that. The company was married to Marshalltown. Eventually, though, Lennox did begin looking around. In the late 1970s it moved its corporate headquarters to Dallas, arguing that a small town in central Iowa was inconvenient for its executives to fly in and out of. The factory stayed where it was.

In 1993, Lennox grew even more restless. It announced that it might have to close the Marshalltown plant altogether. Not because the company was losing money or facing any other sort of crisis, but just because the time had come to seek out the best opportunities. The fact that Marshalltown's very survival might depend on Lennox was of no consequence. "Strictly a business decision," the company vice president said.

In the end, Marshalltown managed to keep Lennox—with what amounted to a bribe of $20 million in subsidies paid by a local government that badly needed the money, to a profitable corporation that really didn't. But the lesson is clear: long-standing relationships don't keep a factory open any more. "In terms of the morality of the situation," the mayor of Marshalltown said, "it's just a fact of life."

There are, of course, technological reasons why companies have gotten wanderlust in the last couple of decades. Computers and telecommunications have made it possible to assemble products almost anywhere in



the world. But threatening to move a profitable company out of its historic home wasn't done in the 1950s mostly because it wasn't thinkable, in the same way that it wasn't thinkable to cancel employees' vacations or fire them at age 50 or 55 when their productivity began to decline. Those actions also would have improved the bottom line. But they were gross infringements on the enduring relationship between worker and manager that factory employment was supposed to be. Breaking up that arrangement was not on the menu of options.

If it is true to say of 1950s America that it was a world of limited choices, it is also fair to call it a world of lasting relationships. This was as true of commerce as it was of sports and politics, and it was nearly as true of the smallest commercial transactions as it was of the big ones.

When John Fary was not busy at politics, he was the proprietor of the 3600 Club, at the corner of 36th Street and South Damen Avenue, in the Back of the Yards neighborhood of Chicago, where his father had run a tavern before him. Fary lived in an apartment above the bar and operated the place himself most of the time.

There was a saloon like Fary's on virtually every block of his neighborhood during most of the years of his life. Each saloon was a sort of community center, a place where stockyards workers, factory workers, cops, and city patronage employees repaired at the end of the day to rest

and to recycle their earnings back through the neighborhood.

When it came to picking a saloon to patronize, these people actually had quite a bit of choice. Just within walking distance there were a dozen possibilities. Fary's own brother operated a similar establishment a couple of blocks away. But once a customer picked his bar, because he liked the smell of it or liked the people he found there, it was his. The market was not a factor. He didn't switch to another tavern because he heard that Hamm's was available on tap for five cents less. The residents of this neighborhood weren't hard-nosed consumers in the current sense. They had a different view of what was important in life.

It takes only the briefest of excursions back into the daily routine of an imaginary family in John Fary's neighborhood, circa 1957, to demonstrate that theirs was indeed a different sort of life altogether.

From the meal that started off the morning, in which the selection of cereals was tiny and the bread was always white, to the recreation in the evening, provided by a TV set that received four stations, most of them carrying a western or a quiz show at any given moment, this family lived in a world where choice was highly limited and authority meant something it does not mean any more. It was a world for which Wonder Bread and black-and-white TV are appropriate symbols, and no room needed to be made for Pop Tarts or toaster strudel, the Nashville Network or CNN.

If the breadwinner in this family drove to work in the morning, he almost certainly did it without the benefit of radio traffic commentators advising him on the best way to get there. One of the Chicago radio stations actually did institute a traffic alert feature in 1957, with a police officer hovering above the city in a helicopter, but most of the people who heard it were bewildered about what to do with the information. Wherever they were going, they had very few routes to choose from: the option of selecting the least congested freeway did not exist for most of them because the freeways themselves did not yet exist. They chose a city street and stayed on it until they reached their destination. If it was slow, it was slow.

Nor did this breadwinner have many choices, whether he worked in a factory or an office, about when to start the workday, when to take a break, or when to go to lunch. Those decisions, too, were out of the realm of choice for most employees in 1957, determined by the dictate of management or by the equally forceful strictures of habit. How to arrange the hours on the job was one of the many questions that the ordinary workers of the 1950s, white-collar and blue-collar alike, did not spend much time agonizing over.

The wife of this breadwinner, if she did not have a job herself, was likely to devote a substantial portion of her day to shopping, banking, and the other routine tasks of household economic management. Like her husband, she faced relatively few personal decisions about where and how to do them. Chances are she took care of her finances at a place in the neighborhood, where she could deposit money, cash checks, and, at the end of the quarter, enjoy the satisfaction of recording a regular savings dividend. She knew the teller personally—the teller had been with the bank as long

as she had, if not longer. But it was also likely that she knew the manager as well, and perhaps the owner. Once she opened an account, there was no need to re-examine the issue, no reason to check on what the competing bank further down Archer Avenue was offering for her money. They all offered about the same thing anyway.

Shopping, in the same way, was based on associations that were, if not permanent, then at least stable for long periods of time. The grocer was a man with whom the family had a relationship; even if his store was a small "supermarket," shoppers tended to personalize it: "I'm going down to Sam's for a minute," women told their children when they left in the afternoon to pick up a cartful of groceries. Because of fair-trade agreements and other economic regulations, the neighborhood grocery of 1957 was in fact reasonably competitive in price with the new megagroceries in the suburbs, but price was not the important issue. Day-to-day commerce was based on relationships—on habit, not on choice.

If this Chicagoan had young children, there is a good chance she also spent part of her day on some school-related activity, volunteering around the building or attending a meeting of the PTA. When it came to schools, her family likely faced one important decision: public or Catholic. Once that choice was made, however, few others remained. The idea of selecting the best possible school environment for one's children would have seemed foreign to these people; one lived within the boundaries of a district or a parish, and that determined where the children went to school. If St. Cecilia's or Thomas Edison wasn't quite as good as its counterpart a mile away (fairly improbable, given the uniformity of the product)—well, that was life.

It should not be necessary to belabor the question of how all these rituals have changed in the decades since then. Our daily lives today are monuments

to selection and to making for ourselves decisions that someone above us used to make on our behalf. We breakfast on choice (sometimes on products literally named for it), take any of several alternative but equally frustrating routes to work, shop in stores whose clerks do not know us, bank in banks where we need to show identification after 20 years because the teller has been there two weeks, and come home to a TV that offers so many choices that the newspaper can't devise a grid to display them all.

In the past generation, we have moved whole areas of life, large and small, out of the realm of permanence and authority and into the realm of change and choice. We have gained the psychological freedom to ask ourselves at any moment not only whether we are eating the right cereal but whether we are in the right neighborhood, the right job, the right relationship.

This is, of course, in large measure a function of technology. Birth control pills created new social and sexual options for women; instantaneous communication by computer made possible all the global options of the footloose corporation. And it is in part a function of simple affluence. Choices multiply in tandem with the dollars we have to invest in them.

But our love affair with choice has not been driven solely by machines, and it has not been driven solely by money. The baby boom generation was seduced by the idea of choice in and of itself.

Most of us continue to celebrate the explosion of choice and personal freedom in our time. There are few among us who are willing to say it is a bad bargain, or who mourn for the rigidities and constrictions of American life in the 1950s.

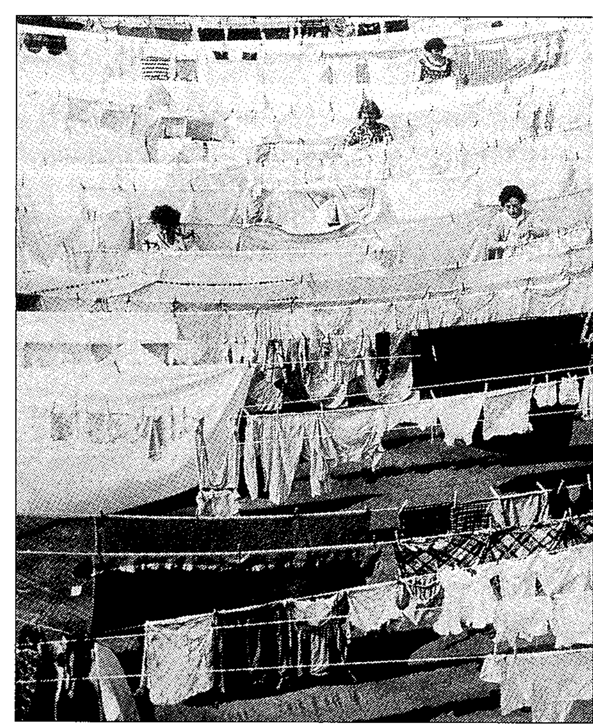
A remarkable number of us, however, do seem to mourn for something about that time. We talk nostalgically of the loyalties and lasting relationships that characterized those days: of the old neighborhoods with mom-and-pop storekeepers who knew us by name; of not having to lock the house at night because no one would think of entering it; of knowing that there would be a neighbor home, whatever the time of day or night, to help us out or take us in if we happened to be in trouble.

There is a longing, among millions of Americans now reaching middle age, for a sense of community that they believe existed during their childhoods and does not exist now. That is why there is a modern movement called communitarianism, and why it has attracted so many adherents and so much attention. "I want to live in a place again where I can walk down any street without being afraid," Hillary Rodham Clinton said shortly after becoming first lady. "I want to be able to take my daughter to a park at any time of day or night in the summer and remember what I used to be able to do when I was a little kid." Those sorts of feelings, and a nostalgia for the benefits of old-fashioned community life at the neighborhood level, are only growing stronger as the century draws to a close.

The very word *community* has found a place, however fuzzy and imprecise, all over the ideological spectrum of the present decade. On the Left, it is a code word for a more egalitarian society in which the oppressed of all colors are included and made the beneficiaries of a more generous social wel-

fare system that commits far more than the current amount to education, public health, and the eradication of poverty. On the Right, it signifies an emphasis on individual self-discipline that would replace the welfare state with a private rebirth of personal responsibility. In the middle, it seems to reflect a much simpler yearning for safety, stability, and a network of stable, reliable relationships. But the concept of community has been all over the pages of popular journalism and political discourse in the first half of the 1990s.

Authority is something else again. It evokes no similar feelings of nostalgia. Few would dispute that it has eroded over the last generation. Walk into a large public high school in a typical middle-class suburb today, and you will see a principal who must spend huge portions of the school day having to cajole recalcitrant students, teachers, and staff into accepting direction that, a generation ago, they would have accepted unquestioningly just because the principal was the principal and they were subordinates. You will see teachers who risk a profane response if they dare criticize one of their pupils.



Or consider the mainstream Protestant church. We haven't yet reached the point where congregants curse their minister in the same way high school students curse their teachers, but if it is even a faintly liberal congregation, there is a good chance that the minister is no longer "Dr." but "Jim," or "Bob," or "Kate," or whatever diminutive his or her friends like to use. Putting ministers on a level with their congregations is one small step in the larger unraveling of authority.

Authority and community have in fact unraveled together. But the demise of authority has brought out very few mourners. To most Americans of the baby boom generation, it will always be a word with sinister connotations, calling forth a rush of uncomfortable memories about the schools, churches, and families in which baby boomers grew up. Rebellion against those memories constituted the defining event of their generational lives. Wherever on the political spectrum this generation has

landed, it has brought its suspicion of authority with it. "Authority," says P. J. O'Rourke, speaking for his baby boom cohorts loud and clear, "has always attracted the lowest elements in the human race."

The suspicion of authority and the enshrinement of personal choice are everywhere in the American society of the 1990s. They extend beyond the routines of our individual lives into the debates we conduct on topics as diverse as school reform and corporate management.

Of all the millions of words devoted in the past decade to the subject of educational change, hardly any have suggested improving the schools by putting the rod back in the teacher's hand or returning to a curriculum of required memorization and classroom drill. The center of the discussion is the concept of school choice: the right of families to decide for themselves which schools their children will attend. Many things may be said for and against the concept of school choice, but one point is clear enough—in education, as in virtually every other social enterprise, individual choice is the antithesis of authority. It is a replacement for it.

Similarly, one can comb the shelves of a bookstore crowded with volumes on corporate management without coming across one that defends the old-fashioned pyramid in which orders come down from the chief executive, military-style, and descend intact to the lower reaches of the organization. There are corporations that still operate that way, but they are regarded as dinosaurs. Corporate hierarchies are out of fashion. The literature is all about constructing management out of webs rather than pyramids, about decentralizing the decision process, empowering people at all levels of the organization. The words "command and control" are the obscenities of present-day management writing.

As they are, more broadly, in economic thinking. Five years ago, few Americans were familiar with the phrase "command economy." Now, virtually all of us know what it means. It is the definition of a society that fails because it attempts to make economic decisions by hierarchy rather than by the free choice of its individual citizens. It is the most broadly agreed-upon reason for the abject failure of world communism. The communist implosion both reinforced and seemed to validate our generational suspicions about hierarchy and authority in all their manifestations, foreign and domestic, the American CEOs and school principals of the 1950s almost as much as the dictators who made life miserable in countries throughout the world.

What has happened in education and economics has also happened, not surprisingly, in the precincts of political thought. There has in fact been a discussion about authority among political philosophers during the past two decades, and its tone tells us something. It has been a debate in which scholars who profess to find at least some value in the concept have struggled to defend themselves against libertarian critics who question whether there is any such thing as legitimate authority at all, even for duly constituted democratic governments. "All authority is equally illegiti-

mate," the philosopher Robert Paul Wolff wrote in a landmark 1971 book, *In Defense of Anarchy.* "The primary obligation of man," Wolff argued, "is autonomy, the refusal to be ruled." It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the record of debate on this subject in the 20 years since has consisted largely of responses to Wolff, most of them rather tentative and half-hearted.

Meanwhile, the revolt against the authority figures of the prior generation has spilled out all over American popular culture, into books and movies and television programs. A prime example (one of many) is *Dead Poets Society*, the 1987 film in which Robin Williams starred as an idealistic young prep school teacher of the 1950s who unwittingly brings on tragedy by challenging two monstrously evil authority figures: the school's headmaster and the father of its most talented drama student. The student commits suicide after the father orders him to give up acting and prepare for a medical career; the headmaster fires the teacher not only for leading the boy astray but for organizing a secret coterie of students who love art and literature and seek to study it outside the deadening rigidities of the school's official curriculum. The message is powerful: true community is a rare and fragile thing, and authority is its enemy. The one way to achieve true community is to question authority—to break the rules.

The message of *Dead Poets Society* cuts across the normal ideological barriers of Left and Right, uniting the student Left of the 1960s and the Reagan conservatives of the 1980s. At its heart is a mortal fear of arbitrary rules and commands, of tyrannical fathers, headmasters, and bosses. E. J. Dionne made this clear in his 1991 book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, quoting the 1970 lyrics of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young: "Rules and regulations, who needs 'em/ Throw 'em out the door." That song was in fact a tirade against Richard J. Daley. But whether it was left or right hardly mattered. It was a song against authority.

The words of such songs may have long since been forgotten by most of those who listened to them, but the tune is still in their heads, even as they have grown into affluence, respectability, and middle age. It expresses itself in the generational worship of personal choice—in speech, in sexual matters, in human relationships of every sort.

If there were an intellectual movement of authoritarians to match that of the communitarians, it would be the modern equivalent of a subversive group. The elites of the country, left and right alike, would regard them as highly dangerous. The America of the 1990s may be a welter of confused values, but on one point we speak with unmistakable clarity: we have become emancipated from social authority as we used to know it.

We don't want the 1950s back. What we want is to edit them. We want to keep the safe streets, the friendly grocers, and the milk and cookies while blotting out the political bosses, the tyrannical headmasters, the inflexible rules, and the lectures on 100 percent Americanism and the sinfulness of dissent. But there is no easy way to have an orderly world without somebody making the rules by which order is

preserved. Every dream we have about recreating community in the absence of authority will turn out to be a pipe dream in the end.

This is a lesson that people who call themselves conservatives sometimes seem determined not to learn. There are many on the Right who, while devoting themselves unquestioningly to the ideology of the free market, individual rights, and personal choice, manage to betray their longing for old-fashioned community and a world of lasting relationships. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan was one of them. His 1984 re-election campaign, built around a series of "Morning Again in America" TV commercials featuring stage-set small-town Main Streets of the sort Reagan strolled down in youth and in Hollywood, was a small token of communitarian rhetoric in the midst of a decade of unraveling standards, both economic and moral. But when people tell us that markets and unlimited choice are good for communities and traditional values, the burden of proof is on them, not us.

Once the pressures of the global market persuaded Lennox Corporation that it had the moral freedom of choice to make air conditioners wherever in the world it wanted to, the bonds that had tied it to a small town in Iowa for nearly a century were breakable. Once McDonald's begins serving breakfast in a small community and siphoning off business from the Main Street café that always provided a morning social center, that café is very likely doomed. There is nothing we can do—or want to do, at any rate—that will stop McDonald's from serving breakfast. Once Wal-Mart turns up on the outskirts of town and undersells the local hardware and clothing stores, Main Street itself is in trouble. People do not want to destroy their historic town centers, but they are rarely willing to resist the siren call of cheaper light bulbs and underwear.

It is the disruptiveness of the market that has taken away the neighborhood savings and loan, with its familiar veteran tellers, and set down in its place a branch of Citibank where no one has worked a month and where the oldest depositor has to slide his driver's license under the window. It is market power that has replaced the locally owned newspaper, in most of the cities in America, with a paper whose owner is a corporate executive far away and whose publisher is a middle manager stopping in town for a couple of years en route to a higher position at headquarters.

In its defense, one can say that the global market onslaught of the last two

decades was technologically inevitable, or, more positively, that it is the best guarantor of individual freedom, and that individual freedom is the most important value for us to preserve. Or one can say that the market puts more dollars in the ordinary citizen's pocket, and that, after all, the bottom line should be the bottom line. But, in the end, there is no escaping the reality that the market is a force for disruption of existing relationships. To argue that markets are the true friend of community is an inversion of common sense. And to idealize markets and call oneself a conservative is to distort reality.

What is true of market worship is true in a larger sense of personal choice, the even more precious emblem of the baby boom generation. While, like the authors of *Dead Poets Society*, we may wish to place community and unrestricted choice on the same side of the social ledger, the fact is that they do not belong together.

Wal-Mart offers a bonanza of choice: acre upon acre of clothing and hardware, dishes and stationery, detergent and Christmas ornaments, the option of choosing from among dozens of models and manufacturers, a cornucopia that no Main Street store can compete with even if it can somehow compete on price. Such businesses are built not on choice but on custom, on the familiarity and the continuing relationship that buyer and seller create over a long period of time. The Main Street café owed its existence to the irrelevance of choice—to the fact that it was the one place in town to go in the morning. Perhaps that meant that the price of eggs or the incentive to cook them perfectly wasn't what it might have been under a more competitive arrangement. But its sheer staying power provided people with something intangible that many of them now realize was important.

The standard argument against this idea is a simple one: when all is said and done, people are entitled to what they want. If they preferred the café or the hardware store on Main Street, they would drive Wal-Mart and the franchise restaurants out of business. If they vote with their stomachs to have breakfast at McDonald's, what business is it of a bunch of communitarian elitists to tell them they ought to go somewhere else for the sake of tradition?

This is a beguiling argument, hard to counter, and yet it is much too simple. People want all sorts of contradictory things. They want to smoke and be healthy, to bulldoze forests for lumber and still have the trees to look at, to have their taxes cut without losing any government benefits. The fact that they want to buy their hardware at the lowest cost doesn't mean they want their downtown commercial district to fall apart. What they want is unlimited consumer choice and a stable, thriving downtown all at the same time. Unfortunately, such a combination is impossible.

To worship choice and community together is to misunderstand what community is all about. Community means not subjecting every action in life to the burden of choice but rather accepting the familiar and reaping the psychological benefits of having one less calculation to make in the course of the day. It is about being Ernie Banks and playing for the Chi-

cago Cubs for 20 years, or being John Fary and sticking with the Daley machine for life, or being one of John Fary's customers and sticking with his tavern at 36th and Damen year in and year out. It is being the Lennox Corporation and knowing that Marshalltown, Iowa, will always be your home.

It would be a pleasure to be a baseball fan today and not have to read every fall about a player who won the World Series for his team and is now jumping to another team that has dangled a juicier contract in front of him. It would be nice to have some of the old loyalty back—to be able to root for Ernie Banks instead of Rickey Henderson. But the stability of Ernie Banks's world depended precisely upon its limits. Restoration of a stable baseball world awaits the restoration of some form of authority over it—not, one hopes, the rigid wage slavery of the reserve clause, but some form of authority nevertheless. In baseball, as in much of the rest of life, that is the price of stability. The price is not low, but the benefit is not small.

It would similarly be a pleasure to allow one's children to watch television or listen to radio without having to worry that they will be seeing or hearing obscenity, but here too the market has assumed a role that used to be occupied by network authority.

Consider television in the 1950s. Certainly no one could plausibly claim that it was not in the grip of market forces. But beyond certain boundaries, the market simply did not operate. No doubt there would have been considerable viewer demand for a pornographic version of *Some Like It Hot*, or perhaps a version of *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* in which Kirk Douglas was eaten alive in CinemaScope by the giant squid.

Those things were absent from television in the 1950s not because no one would have watched them but because there were sanctions against their being shown. There was someone in a position of authority—in this case, a censor—who stepped in to overrule the market and declare that some things are too lurid, too violent, or too profane for a mass audience to see.

It is in the absence of such authority that five-year-olds can conveniently watch MTV or listen to Howard Stern, and 12-year-olds can buy rap albums that glorify gangsterism, murder, and rape. It is a matter of free choice. Obscenity and violence sell, and we do not feel comfortable ordering anyone, even children, not to choose them. We are not yet willing to pay the price that decency in public entertainment will require. But if children are not to gorge themselves on violent entertainment, then it is an inconvenient fact that someone besides the children themselves must occupy a position of authority.

Some readers will no doubt object that I am portraying the 1950s as a premodern, precapitalist Eden. I am not that naïve. Nobody who spends any time studying the period—nobody who lived through it—can entertain for long the notion that it was a time when people were insulated from market forces. The 1950s were the decade of tail fins, mass-produced suburban subdivisions, and the corruption of television quiz shows by greedy sponsors. The market was immensely powerful; it was the enemy that an entire generation of postwar social critics took aim against.

In the 1950s, however, a whole array of social institutions still stood outside the grip of the market and provided ordinary people with a cushion against it. In the last generation, as sociologist Alan Wolfe and others have eloquently pointed out, that cushion has disappeared. The difference between the 1950s and the 1990s is to a large extent the difference between a society in which market forces challenged traditional values and a society in which they have triumphed over them.

And the decisiveness of that triumph is written in the values that the baby boom generation has carried with it from youth on into middle age: the belief in individual choice and the suspicion of any authority that might interfere with it.

Of course, there will be quite a few people to whom none of this makes any sense, people who believe that individual choice is the most important standard, period; that no society can ever get enough of it; that the problem in the last generation is not that we have abandoned authority but that there are still a few vestiges of it yet to be eradicated. Many of these people call themselves libertarians, and arguing with them is complicated by the fact that they are nearly always intelligent, interesting, and personally decent.

Libertarian ideas are seductive and would be nearly impossible to challenge if one thing were true—if we lived in a world full of P. J. O'Rourkes, all of us bright and articulate and individualistic and wanting nothing more than the freedom to try all the choices and experiments that life has to offer and express our individuality in an endless series of new and creative ways.

But this is the libertarian fallacy: the idea that the world is full of repressed libertarians waiting to be freed from the bondage of rules and authority. Perhaps, if they were right, life would be more interesting. But what they failed to notice, as they squirmed awkwardly through childhood in what seemed to them the straitjacket of school and family and church, is that most people are not like them. Most people want a chart to follow, and are not happy when they don't have one, or when having learned one as children, they later see people all around them ignoring it. While the legitimacy of any particular set of rules is a subject that philosophers will always debate, it nonetheless remains true, and in the end more important, that the uncharted life, the life of unrestricted choice and eroded authority, is one most ordinary people do not enjoy leading.

There is no point in pretending that the 1950s were a happy time for everyone in America. For many, the price of the limited life was an impossibly high one to pay. To have been an independent-minded alderman in the Daley machine, a professional baseball player treated unfairly by his team, a suburban housewife who yearned for a professional career, a black high school student dreaming of possibilities that were foreclosed to him, a gay man or woman forced to conduct a charade in public—to have been any of these things in the 1950s was to live a life that was difficult at best and tragic at worst. That is why so many of us still respond to the memory of those indignities by saying that nothing in the world could justify them.

It is a powerful indictment; it is also a selective one. It is often said that history is written by the winners, but the truth is that the cultural images that come down to us as history are written, in large part, by the dissenters— by those whose strong feelings against life in a particular generation motivate them to become the novelists, playwrights, and social critics of the next, drawing inspiration from the injustices and hypocrisies of the time in which they grew up. We have learned much of what we know about family life in America in the 1950s from women who chafed under its restrictions, either as young, college-educated housewives who found it unfulfilling or as teenage girls secretly appalled by the prom-and-cheerleader social milieu. Much of the image of American Catholic life in those years comes from the work of former Catholics who considered the church they grew up in not only authoritarian but destructive of their free choices and creative instincts. We remember the inconsistencies and absurdities of life a generation ago: the pious, skirt-chasing husbands, the martini-sneaking ministers, the sadistic gym teachers.

I am not arguing with the accuracy of any of those individual memories. And yet, nearly lost to our collective indignation are the millions of people who took the rules seriously and tried to live up to them, within the profound limits of human weakness. They are still around, the true believers of the 1950s, in small towns and suburbs and big-city neighborhoods all over the country, reading the papers, watching television, and wondering in old age what has happened to America in the last 30 years. If you visit middle-class American suburbs today and talk to the elderly women who have lived out their adult years in these places, they do not tell you how constricted and demeaning their lives in the 1950s were. They tell you those were the best years they can remember. And if you visit a working-class Catholic parish in a big city and ask the older parishioners what they think of the church in the days before Vatican II, they don't tell you that it was tyrannical or that it destroyed their individuality. They tell you they wish they could have it back. For them, the erosion of both community *and* authority in the last generation is not a matter of intellectual debate. It is something they can feel in their bones, and the feeling makes them shiver.

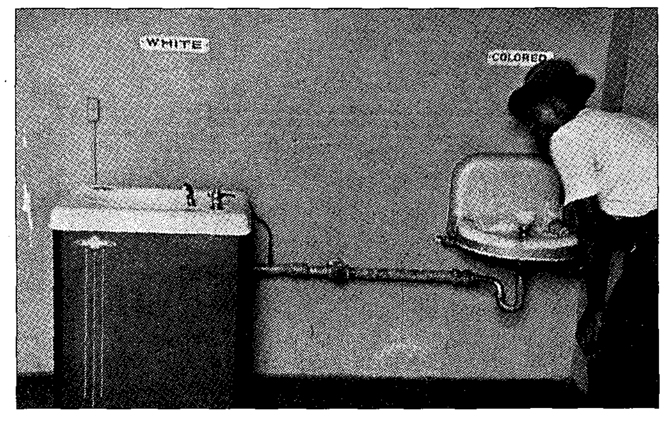
To be sure, America is full of people willing to remind us at every opportunity that the 1950s are not coming back. Ozzie and Harriet are dead, they like to say, offering an instant refutation to just about anyone who ventures to point out something good about the social arrangements of a generation ago—conventional families, traditional neighborhoods, stabler patterns of work, school, politics, religion. All of these belong, it is said, to a world that no longer exists and cannot be retrieved. We have moved on.

And of course they are right. If retrieving the values of the 1950s means recreating a world of men in fedora hats returning home at the end of the day to women beaming at them with apron and carpet sweeper, then it is indeed a foolish idea.

But the real questions raised by our journey back to the 1950s are much more complicated, and they have nothing to do with *Ozzie and Harriet* or *Leave*

It to Beaver. They are questions like these: can we impose some controls on the chaos of individual choice that we have created in the decades since then? Can we develop a majority culture strong enough to tell its children that there are inappropriate ways to behave in a high school corridor, and that there are programs that eight-year-olds should not be free to watch on television? Is there a way to relearn the simple truth that there is sin in the world, and that part of our job in life is to resist its temptations?

The quickest way of dealing with these questions is to say that the genie is out of the bottle and there is no way to put it back. Once people free themselves from rules and regulations, taste the temptations of choice, they will never return to a more-ordered world. Once they have been told they do not have to stay married—to their spouses, communities, careers, to any of the commitments that once were made for life—they will be on the loose forever. Once the global economy convinces corporations that there is no need for the personal and community loyalties they once practiced, those loyalties are a dead letter. So we will be told many times in the years to come.



But is it true? Is the only sequel to social disorder further disorder? There are other scenarios, if we do not mind making a leap to look for them.

It is always dangerous to stack up decades one against the other, but it is remarkable how many of the laments and nostalgic reflections of the 1990s sound curiously like those of one particular time in the history of America in this century. They sound like the rhetoric of the 1920s.

Seventy years ago, the best-selling book in America was Mark Sullivan's *Our Times*, a fond chronicle of everyday life before the Great War and a lament for the lost community of those years. "Preceding the Great War," Sullivan said, "the world had had a status—an equilibrium." Since then, the most prominent feature of social life for the average American had been "a discontent with the postwar commotion, the turbulence and unsettlement that surrounded him and fretted him; it was a wish for settled ways, for conditions that remained the same long enough to become familiar and dear, for routine that remained set, for a world that 'stayed put.' "

More than anything else, Sullivan believed, the eroding values of the 1920s had to do with technology—with the automobile and the methods of mass production that had transformed the American factory in the first quarter of the 20th century. So it is more than marginally interesting that the creator of those methods, Henry Ford, spent the 1920s mourning so-

cial change as much as anyone. In 1926, he began the construction of Greenfield Village, a historic replica of the place where he had grown up, complete with gravel roads, gas lamps, and a country store. "I am trying in a small way," Ford explained, "to help America take a step . . . toward the saner and sweeter idea of life that prevailed in pre-war days."

Ford believed that the pace of living had somehow accelerated beyond easy comprehension or control. So did millions of other people who were less responsible for the change than he was. "In our great cities," the financier Simon Straus worried early in the decade, "people break down in health or reach premature senility because of late hours, loss of sleep, fast pleasures, and headlong, nerve-racking methods of existence."

The sense of debilitating change and collapsing rules was not simply an idea loose in the popular culture of the 1920s; it was central to the most sophisticated intellectual debate. Walter Lippmann talked about the "acids of modernity" undermining traditional truths and authoritative standards. Joseph Wood Krutch, in *The Modern Temper* (1929), argued that science had broken life loose from any moral compass altogether.

In the years since, historians who have studied the 1920s have struggled to come to terms with its palpable tension and longing for a simpler time. Two decades ago, Roderick Nash set out to write a new book about the period after World War I variously described as the "Roaring Twenties" and the "Jazz Age." He ended up with *The Nervous Generation* as his title. "The typical American in 1927 was nervous," he wrote in one chapter. "The values by which he ordered his life seemed in jeopardy of being swept away by the forces of growth and change and complexity."

It was a point reminiscent of one made a few years earlier, by the historian William Leuchtenburg, in *The Perils of Prosperity* (1958). Two things about the 1920s stood out most clearly to Leuchtenburg: the loss of community and the loss of authority.

"The metropolis had shattered the supremacy of the small town," Leuchtenburg wrote, "and life seemed infinitely more impersonal. It was proverbial that the apartment-house dweller did not know his neighbor. . . . In the American town of 1914, class lines, though not frozen, were unmistakable. Each town had its old families. . . . The world they experienced was comprehensible. The people they saw were the people they knew. . . . Moral standards were set by the church and by the family. Parents were confident enforcers of the moral code. By 1932, much of the sense of authority was gone."

It was easy to dismiss those who mourned the social losses of the 1920s by telling them that they were indulging in flights of nostalgic fantasy. The Great War was a social as well as a political watershed; the horse and buggy was gone, and so was the America it represented. Anyone who bothered to point to the communitarian virtues of life before the war ran the risk of being trumped by the all-purpose Ozzie and Harriet rejoinder: "Forget it. Those days are over."

And they were, in the same sense that the 1950s are gone today. But nobody on either side of the argument had any clue as to what lay ahead in the two decades that would follow: extraordinary group effort and so-

cial cohesion in the face of the massive challenges of the Great Depression and another world war, back to back. The 1930s and '40s not only produced real communitarian values but generated real leaders and authority figures whose arrival appeared as unlikely in the individualist era of the 1920s as it does amid the individualism of the 1990s.

It would be foolish to minimize the tensions and divisions that existed in America all through the Great Depression and war years, or to suggest that those years somehow represented a return to the innocence of the time before World War I. Still, it seems fair enough to say that, under the pressures of crisis, the country developed a sense of cohesion and structures of authority that seemed lost forever only a few years before.

Of course, suggesting that community and authority tend to return in times of crisis may not be a very reassuring or relevant argument for the 1990s, a time when both depression and world war seem remote prospects. But could the moral erosion of the present time be, in its way, a crisis sufficient to rival war or economic collapse? And if so, might a swing back to older values be a plausible response? Perhaps that is not so farfetched.

There is an even more interesting case, if one is willing to cross the ocean to look for it.

The year 1820 in England was a time of notorious disrespect for the very highest levels of authority. The king and queen were national laughingstocks, exposed as such by a sensational divorce trial that documented the stupidity of both. The political system was distrusted as a cesspool of corruption, with seats in Parliament bought and sold at the constituency level by private wealth, and the Church of England was widely regarded as a bastion of clerical privilege rather than religious devotion. The cultural superstars were artists such as Byron and Shelley, notorious for their rejection of what they considered obsolete standards of family life and sexual morality: Byron boasted publicly of having slept with 200 women in two years, while Shelley was a wifeswapper and founder of a free love colony. The country was in the midst of a widespread and poorly concealed wave of opium addiction that was disabling some of its most promising talents.

England's conservative social critics of that time lamented the disappearance of authority, community, and all the bonds that had made the place livable in the 18th century. "The ties which kept the different classes of society in a vital and harmonious dependence on each other," William Wordsworth wrote, "have with these 30 years either been greatly impaired or wholly dissolved."

Wordsworth was referring to the 30 years since the events that triggered the French Revolution and launched a revolution in manners all over the Western world. To most thoughtful people, 1789 had been a watershed that set "modern times" off from an old regime that grew fainter and more remote with each passing year. To talk to them about a "return" to the arrangements that prevailed before 1789 would surely have struck them as an exercise in fantasy.

Certainly few of them believed that, a generation later, England would

be in the midst of a period famous to this day for its sexual prudery and obsessive concern with "family values," renowned for its national devotion to a frumpy, widowed queen, and marked by the reform and revitalization of its religious establishment. Victorian England does not represent a re-enactment of any previous historical time; it merely serves as a reminder that there is a pendulum at work in the manners and values of a society, and that it can swing when no one expects it to.

The year 1820 was separated by just three decades from the start of the French Revolution and the arrival of what was thought to be a permanent social transformation. In 1995, it is just three decades since the events of the mid-1960s, the social and moral equivalent of Bastille Day in our own lives. There is nothing farfetched about asking when the pendulum might begin to swing again.

One needs to be even more politically careful talking about the England of Queen Victoria than about the America of Ozzie and Harriet. Anybody who refers to it in anything but the most caustic terms risks being labeled an advocate of censorship and sexual repression. But it is nonetheless true, and revealing, that in the past few years a growing number of scholars have suggested that the Victorians have something to tell us about our situation.

"Contemplating our own society," the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote in 1994, "we may be prepared to take a more appreciative view of Victorian moralism—of the 'Puritan ethic' of work, thrift, temperance, cleanliness; of the idea of 'respectability' that was as powerful among the working classes as among the middle classes."

Himmelfarb not only writes with approval of Victorian virtues; she comes close to suggesting that they will reappear sometime in the coming decades. "If in a period of rapid economic and social change, the Victorians showed a substantial improvement in their 'condition' and 'disposition,' " she argues, "it may be that economic and social change do not necessarily result in personal and public disarray. If they could retain and even strengthen an ethos that had its roots in religion and tradition, it may be that we are not as constrained by the material conditions of our time as we have thought."

As Himmelfarb points out, the Victorian era did not witness any national slowdown in the pace of societal change. Its cohort lived through a time of enormous technological upheaval marked by the appearance of the railroad, telegraph, and camera, and the expansion of the British Empire into a worldwide colossus that made immense fortunes and transformed the economy at home.

What can be said about the Victorians is not that they reversed the flow of social change but that they searched for anchors to help them cope with it, and that they found them in the familiar places: family, religion, and patriotism of the hokiest and most maudlin variety.

And that also seems a fair thing to say about the 1950s in America. They were not years of stasis but of rapid and bewildering change: nuclear tension, population explosion, the creation of a new world in the suburbs, the sudden emergence of a prosperity and materialism that scarcely anyone

had expected. The people who lived through this change looked for anchors to help them cope with it all, and found them, however imperfectly, where people normally look for such things: at home, in church, in the rituals and pieties of patriotic excess. They found them in "togetherness" and the basement family room, in the Holy Name Society and the Green Donkeys Social Club, in Bishop Sheen and Walt Disney. It required some pretending—some hypocrisy, if you insist—but it served its purpose.

We are never going to return to the 1950s in America, any more than we are going to return to Victorian standards of morality. And we should not want to return to them. What is past is past. What we badly need to do, once our rebellion against the 1950s has run its course, is to rebuild some anchors of stability to help us through times of equally unsettling change.

For that to happen anytime soon, the generation that launched the rebellion will have to force itself to rethink some of the unexamined "truths" with which it has lived its entire adult life. It will have to recognize that privacy, individuality, and choice are not free goods, and that the society that places no restrictions on them pays a high price for that decision. It will have to retrieve the idea of authority from the dustbin to which it was confined by the 1960s deluge. The middle-aged communitarian who yearns, in the words of Hillary Clinton, to "do what I used to be able to do when I was a little kid," has no alternative but to develop a realism about the natural limits of life that most of the baby boomers have yet to demonstrate.

There is a good chance that this will not happen. It is difficult enough for individuals to correct the misconceptions of their youth once they have reached middle age. For the largest single generation in American history to do this in the years remaining to it seems highly problematic.

In that case, what really matters is what the next generation grows up believing—those who are children now, who are being raised by the creators of the deluge. What will they think about community and authority, habit and choice, sin and virtue? This generation will come to adulthood in the early years of the next century with an entirely different set of childhood and adolescent memories from the ones their parents absorbed. They will remember being bombarded with choices, and the ideology of choice as a good in itself; living in transient neighborhoods and broken and recombinant families in which no arrangement could be treated as permanent; having parents who feared to impose rules because rules might stifle their freedom and individuality.

Will a generation raised that way be tempted to move, in its early adult years, toward a reimposition of order and stability, even at the risk of losing some of the choice and personal freedom its parents worshipped? To dismiss that idea out of hand is to show too little respect for the pendulum that operates in the values of any society, and the natural desire of any generation to use it to correct the errors and excesses of the one that went before.