King Address

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In 1978 Andrei Voznesensky toured the United States providing Americans with a glimpse of Soviet life through his poetry readings. I was fortunate to be in one such audience while still a graduate student at Purdue University. That night he read *Nostalgia for the Present,* “Ностальгия по Настоящему**,”** which opens with:

> Я не знаю, как остальные,
> но я чувствую жесточайшую
> не по прошлому ностальгию —
> ностальгию по настоящему.[1]
>
> I do not know about the rest of you,
> But I feel the cruelest
> Nostalgia—not for the past—
> But nostalgia for the present.

I found his readings and this poem in particular so beguiling that I bought his collection of poems the very next day. Being a good poet Voznesenky transcended rather than triangulated to convey to his audience the feelings of nostalgia for the present. Not being a poet, I, however, will have to trek through a forest of ideas to make my points.

What exactly is nostalgia? We can all summon it. Perhaps you recall a time when the milkman delivered milk to your home and placed the bottles in the milkbox next to your door, and, if it were cold outside, how the cream at the top would freeze. Each of us, I am sure, has memories that beckon the good days of the past and evoke the feeling of nostalgia.

So maybe the first question really should be: what was nostalgia? Its Greek roots are *nostos*, meaning, "to return home" and *algos*, meaning, "pain," so nostalgia was the pain to return home. The term was coined in 1688 by a young Swiss medical student as a way to talk about a fatal kind of homesickness that afflicted Swiss mercenaries who were far from their mountain homes**.**

Perhaps the earliest remedy for this pain was eating lotus-plants, which Odysseus and his men did so when the winds drove them far off course. The incessant longing to see his family again and his perpetual determination were what gave Odysseus the strength to return home.

Odysseus longed for home, but our nostalgia seems more to be a longing for a time rather than for a place. Kant noted that people who did return home usually were disenchanted

because they did not want to return to a place, but rather to a time, like the time of youth. We have gradually conquered the confines imposed by great distances. The telegraph, then the telephone, then the jet, and now the Internet have enabled us to communicate and even travel across vast distances that only a century and a half ago would have taken months. Whereas language, either written or spoken, was previously the only form in which messages could be encoded, we now have streams of data bits that express images as well as words. In addition, in the past, most people did not have access to the growing resources and knowledge in science, art, medicine, or philosophy. These problems of space and place have been tackled by the best minds with great innovation, and we have overcome them with penetrating insights and unbridled imagination.

Here we have one of several tensions that arise in nostalgia. We can recreate a place to the minutest detail, yet it is not the real thing, the remembered thing. Hollywood, through computer animation, can place us anywhere in the world or in the universe. For example, through the Stargate on the SciFi channel we can be whisked off to the Pegasus galaxy, millions of light years away, in only a few seconds by traveling through a wormhole, a clever little tunnel in spacetime that can be used to travel from one spacetime coordinate to another. We can watch *Happy Days* on DVD, yet, when the credits roll, we alas are in *Modern Times*. Nonetheless, we still long for the reality—we have nostalgia for the present. The danger of the trickery of television and cinemas, the use of robotic rather than real, is that these means will become mythic—the way things are done and we will lose the reality of grass, warm homes on cold nights, and, yes, milk bottles on the porch.

Будто сделал я что-то чуждое,
или даже не я — другие.
Упаду на поляну — чувствую
по живой земле ностальгию.

It's as if I had done something wrong,
Not I even—but others.
I fall down in a field and feel
nostalgia for the living earth.

Time, unlike space, cannot be revisited or returned to—ever; time is irreversible and nostalgia is our reaction to that distressing fact. Nostalgia probably results from the irrecoverable nature of the past and its emotional impact and appeal. The very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, empowers nostalgia. It is not the past of our actual experiences but rather the past as imagined and romanticized by selective memories and our desire for an ideal world, a perfect time, or at least a pleasant, secure time. In this sense, however, nostalgia refers less to the past and more to the present: Nostalgia arises when the perfect world, which is not the present, is projected into the past. Treasured moments selected by memory and also by forgetting become the ideal time, which does not exist in the present but which is projected onto the past. We search for a time when the journey was as pleasant as the destination. Nostalgia for the past or even the present feeds on the

hopelessness of recapturing this past and the inability to attain it makes the past even more alluring. So nostalgia is more about the present than about the past.

> Что прошло, то прошло. К лучшему.
> Но прикусываю, как тайну,
> ностальгию по-настоящему.
> Что настанет. Да не застану.
>
> Whatever is past is past. So much the better.
> But I bite at it as at a mystery,
> nostalgia for the impending present,
> And I'll never catch hold of it.

I imagine that each of you has done something repetitively, over and over again, looking for a different result. I wish that I could recover the time I spent staring at data and running analyses with the hope that something new would pop out. Einstein defined "Insanity: [as] doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." Perhaps we are all a bit insane as we try to recover the present, as we attempt to learn by repeating the past mistakes of others.

Physicists view space and time as an incontrovertible oneness—spacetime—the four dimensions that form the fabric of the universe. Everything physical exists in spacetime. Goethe anticipated this unified view when he wrote:

> Time and space merge ... into an inseparable unity ... a definite and absolutely concrete locality serves at the starting point for the creative imagination... this is a piece of human history, historical time condensed into space.[2]

In spacetime each point in the continuum, is an event. Each event engenders an absolute future of subsequent events that can be causally connected to it through contact, with the fastest agent being light. Likewise, each event has an absolute past—a collection of events that could have influenced it and been causally connected. So in the physicist's view of the universe, we, actually each proton, electron, and subatomic particle of our being, move through spacetime. Interactions with others determine our path along the spacetime fabric. Often those interactions are chance. We all can find a major event in our life that altered our course through spacetime. Just imagine, for example, if George W. Bush has never entered a library and saw Laura!

A second tension of the present, then, concerns the randomness of interactions. If only life could be a direct path from understanding A to achievement B to development C which leads to epiphany D, and so on. But life has randomness; life has chaos. Some randomness, of course, can be avoided by careful thought, by laid-out plans. Chaos too can be minimized but never eliminated. Somewhere, sometime the beating of a butterfly's wing in Honduras will affect us!

The defining essence of our experiences is interaction. And each interaction lives in the fleeting now of the present. As the quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg observed, "You cannot touch without being touched." Interactions involve an exchange and a change. Neither person, neither object, are the same after an interaction. So, perhaps, our nostalgia for the present is also a yearning for interaction.

In exploring spacetime, Einstein showed that, by traveling at great speeds, and hence, over great distances through space, we can travel in time, into the future but, alas, not into the nostalgic past. For example, by traveling 15 years of your life with constant acceleration of 9.8 m/s^2, then slowing down for 15 years at the same acceleration, you could travel 500,000 light years—enough to reach the small galaxies, the Magellanic clouds, which are being consumed by the Milky Way. By repeating the process, you could return to Earth, having traveled across the galaxy and back, in a mere 60 years of your life. However, the Earth to which you returned would have moved differently through spacetime and would be 1,100,000 years older than the day you left. This is a version of the so-called twin paradox.

More recently, physicists have found ways to travel into the past by evading the barriers to time travel. Sometimes, sufficient warping of a particular spacetime makes possible the existence of paths known as closed timelike curves. A traveler moving along such a warped path would discover that his or her watch always ticks away seconds into the future, even though the traveler eventually ends up where—and when—he or she started.

A third tension of nostalgia for the present presents itself to us—our dream to regain the present, to circumvent the causality that we have lived with since birth, to enter the realm of paradox lost not only by thought but also by action and by being there. We yearn to possess what *Alice Through the Looking Glass* has: a looking glass—a wormhole that connects her home to wonderland. By going through the looking glass, Alice could travel through space and time and appear on the other side of forever.

In reality however, constructing a physical wormhole, even one just barely large enough to allow Cherie to pass through it, would probably require the construction of two, huge identical machines made of monstrous parallel metal plates that would be electrically charged with unbelievable amounts of energy to amazingly high voltage. When placed in near each other, the enormous amount of energy stored in the electric field—about that of an exploding star—would tear a hole in spacetime and connect the two machines via a wormhole. For the present, such technology is beyond our fossil fuel powered civilization.

A fourth tension evoked by nostalgia for the present stems from the loss of common experiences. A few years ago I was researching into better methods for teaching physics, when I listened to high school teachers describe their courses and student populations. Students from high socioeconomic areas had computers and Internet access, which they used for all of their "experiments." They never rolled a ball down an incline or shook a slinky to make a wave. Everything was virtual. On the other hand, students from schools in low socioeconomic areas did not have easy access to computers, so they had more

hands-on experience with physics. Which was a better way to learn? Do common, shared experiences aid or detract from learning?

Nowadays, we have the news, weather, blogs, and movies delivered to our home computers yet often we fail to step outside to sample the weather or even go to the theater. We have colleagues down the hall who send an email rather than taking a few steps. We listen in isolation to music on our iPods and don't share in the magnificence of a symphony.

Одиночества не искупит
в сад распахнутая столярка.
Я тоскую не по искусству,
задыхаюсь по настоящему.

A window opening on a garden
will not redeem loneliness.
I long not for art—I choke
on my craving for reality.

The printing press greatly diminished the oral tradition of transmitting knowledge. The telegraph, telephone, and then the Internet reduced global distances to mere fractions of seconds of light travel. Email and text messaging have assaulted the written word. The computer, perhaps, will wipe out shared experiences as we work in isolation.

The connections between information and human purpose, between individuals and the community, it seems, have been severed. Information now is a valued commodity that is bought and sold. Companies that deal with information have stocks valued higher than those that deal in tangibles. Information surrounds us and suffocates us, whether we ask for it or not. Much information is intended for no one in particular. We lose our identity as we become merely an email address, a final destination for spam. Information has become disconnected from any meaning or any significance. Just check your UD email!

So, a final tension of nostalgia for the present involves the flood of information in which we are awash. I imagine that you, like me, have too much information to process. There is a journal article here, a story there, a review over there, an email with interesting comments, and, of course, an entire world wide web of sites to ensnare us. I believe that marketing has a term for it: option anxiety. We have created a new problem never experienced before: an information glut due to immediate access to data that can be disjointed and worthless. From millions of sources all over the world, through cable and satellite channels, telephone wires, fiber optic cables, information pours in. Likewise, astounding arrays of storage means—paper, CD-ROM, DVD, MP3, fire wire drive, and thumb drives—hold an ever expanding volume of information waiting to be retrieved. When, somewhere in the nostalgic past, information was an essential resource for helping us to understand our physical and metaphorical worlds, our technological resourcefulness has "transformed information into a form of garbage, and ourselves into garbage collectors."[3]

In a wonderful sonnet contained in her collection *Huntsman, What Quarry?* written in the 1930s, Edna St. Vincent Millay, prophesied this problem of information without meaning:

> Upon this age, that never speaks its mind,
> This furtive age, this age endowed with power
> To wake the moon with footsteps, fit an oar
> Into the rowlocks of the wind, and find
> What swims before his prow, what swirls behind -
> Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
> Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
> Of facts . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
> Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
> Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
> To weave it into fabric. [4]

We have no loom to weave all this information into the fabric of meaning. We have no stories, no narratives to tell us what we need to know, and especially what we do not need to know. We have no order in the information, just chaos. We have no fabric to provide us with moral guidance and social purpose.

As university professors we must address these tensions in seeking the present, all nostalgia aside. We need to write the narratives for our students and to develop in them thinking skills so that they can achieve what Stanford educator and scientist Paul Hurd put forth for a literate society: "to distinguish evidence from propaganda, probability from certainty, rational belief from superstition, science from fiction, data from assertions, science from folklore, credibility from incredibility, theory from dogma."[5] Without such narratives, our students will discover the emptiness of information that does not touch any of the significant questions of life. If children are dying of AIDS in Africa, it has nothing to do with lack of information about living conditions, tribal customs, or disease. It has everything to do with our failure to create a worldwide community, our lack of interest in common experiences, and our moral leadership. If our skies are polluted, it has nothing to do with a scarcity of information about chemical interactions, but everything to do with lack of educating a populus and managing corporate profit. If there are victims of earthquakes, it has nothing to do with lack of knowledge of geological faults. It has everything to do with constructing earthquake proof buildings and educating people in their construction. If there are starving people, it is not because we do not know how to produce enough food to feed them. It may have everything to do with it being possible to live without a loom to weave our lives into a fabric.

We need to inform students about a world made paradoxically smaller by our technologies, yet larger than we can individually grasp. Nostalgia of the evaporating present might impel us to look beyond to the past as well as to the future as we grapple with this task. The challenges we face focus on the human condition, on our ability and inability to understand ourselves and the universe around us, and on the personal relationship of God with his creatures. By weaving a fabric distinguished by critical thinking and compassion,

by understanding of the great ideas of antiquity as well as participating in the uncharted forefronts of research, and by selfless service to the life of the community we can impart wisdom, virtue, and understanding to our students to meet those challenges and, importantly, to dream of improving the world they inherit.

> We were wrought up in ideas inexpressible and vaporous, but to be fought for. We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to re-make in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep: and was pitiably weak against age. We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven and a new earth, and they thanked us kindly and made their peace.
>
> All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.[6]
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> —T. E. Lawrence, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

We and our students are those dangerous men and women.

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[1] Andrei Voznesensky, *Nostalgia for the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 2.

[2] Michael M. Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism." 1937-38. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Ed. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: U of Texas Press, 1986) 49.

[3] Neil Postman, “Science and the Story We Need,” *First Things* 69 (1997): 29.

[4] Edna Saint Vincent Millay, Sonnet 137, *Huntsman, What Quarry?* (New York: Harper, 1934), 697.

[5] Paul D. Hurd, Scientific Literacy: New Minds for a Changing World. *Science Education* 82, (1998): 407.

[6] T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 2nd Ed, Project Gutenberg of Australia E-book, No.: 0100111.txt.