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Thinking Back Over the Century

I remember being startled as a young child when I first realized that I might be alive when the 1900s ended and we began naming years beginning with the words "two thousand." I had no idea why that sounded like a bid deal, since no one talked about millennia, and I wouldn't have understood it if they had, but there was something mysterious about leaving the 'teens behind.

As that day approaches, the childhood mystery has evaporated, replaced by work-a-day practical concerns about the damn machines we have come to depend upon and the intellectual knowledge that the new millennia doesn't really start until the end of next year! So much for the pleasures of childhood mystery!

As we approach the hour at which all the digits on the chronometer change, it is hard not to reflect back on all those years that carried the number nineteen, at least those that I lived through. As the University of Montana worried a satellite into orbit and the title of rocket scientist became a bit tarnished (but no where near as tarnished as the title of economist), it amazes me to vividly recall the early morning sounds of the horse-drawn wagon that delivered milk to my childhood home: clip-clop, clip-clop, the jingle of milk bottles in the delivery basket, time to drift back off to sleep. My first adventures into strange lands as a child came following the horse-drawn garbage wagons one summer. That is how I learned the hidden by-ways of my neighborhood and found a treasure trove, the city dump. I established an endless cycle, lugging home wonderful mechanical finds only to have my parents add them back to the garbage to be picked up the following week.

As politicians and educators now debate the benefits of reducing class sizes from 30 to 25 to 20, I chuckle at the sixty squirming youngsters who filled my center city parochial classrooms scared to death of the scowling nun in mysteriously flowing black garb, outlandish starched white headdress, heavy wooden rosary beads and crucifix swinging at her side, the only flesh showing: her face and hands. Somehow, in a crumbling building from an even earlier century, with teachers with no college degree at all who were more concerned about our sexual purity than our intellectual or social development, all of us learned to read and do our fractions, even if most of us also learned to hate school.

The concern with the sexual innocence of our children continues, almost as naively as it did then. At least in my urban, immigrant dominated, setting, we were not very innocent despite the strict religious character of our households and schools.

A rich, if not very accurate, folk knowledge was passed on to us by those slightly older. Primitive pornography was passed eagerly around. We all knew who the local child molesters were, including those in the church, but that was just a normal part of the dangerous social landscape we had to navigate daily. It was rarely safe, and we did not escape without some damage. But that was like skinned knees and bloody noses, something unavoidable if one was going to engage life with a sense of adventure.

Drugs and tobacco of course are also not a new issue with kids. I was puking my guts out on city streets by the time I was ten. Alcohol became a regular component of social life by late grade school. In a hard-drinking, immigrant, working-class neighborhood, that's not surprising, but most of the impulse has to be attributed to the unquenchable childhood itch to explore one new experience after another, to discover what else we were missing out on that adults were trying to keep from us.

There are contemporary concepts that just didn't ring a bell back then. Pollution is one of them. When I swam in the harbor as a kid, I never swam the crawl or any stroke that required me to put my face in the water. A breaststroke was preferred because that allowed you to sweep the trash and garbage away as you swam. With a graceful stroke, you could push the human turds away from your mouth and continue smoothly on your way. The ships flushed their toilets directly into the harbor's water and the city's sewage overflow also was conveniently directed there. One of the many versions of chicken that we played with each other was to enter the gargantuan sewer overflow pipes and travel back into them until there was absolutely no light remaining, all the time trying to scare each other with stories of huge rats, dead bodies, or the sound of on-rushing water, waiting to see who would call for us to turn back first.

In the squeaky-clean, carefully-policed middle class lifestyle we now try to pass on to our kids, these mid-20th century recollections may sound wretched to some. But as the chronometer numbers change to the big 2-0-0-0, I am amused at how similar have been the experiences of my own, now grown, children, not how different things are. Happy millennia everyone!