

December 31, 2009

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Times to Remember, Places to Forget

By DANIEL GILBERT

Cambridge, Mass.

TONIGHT, millions of Americans will raise a glass, sing the only three Scottish words they know and remember the past with an ineffable blend of sadness and delight. Nostalgia has all the hallmarks of a universal emotion, and it is only natural to assume that the yearning for “auld lang syne” that was shared by our grandparents will someday be shared by our grandchildren.

But maybe we’ve reached nostalgia’s end. “Nostalgia” — made up of the Greek roots for “suffering” and “return” — is literally a longing for the places of one’s past. And lately, it has become harder and harder to find things to miss about America’s places.

Downtowns were once collections of local businesses that lured us with claims of uniqueness: “Try our homemade pies,” their signs read, or “Best jazz selection in town.” Today, those signs have been replaced by familiar corporate logos that make precisely the opposite claim, promising us the same goods arranged in the same way as they are in every other place. The banks and burritos and baristas on one city block are replicated on the next — and in all the malls, in all the cities, in all the states. Americans can drive from one ocean to the other, stopping every day for the same hamburger and every evening at the same hotel. Traveling in a straight line is no longer much different than traveling in a circle.

When the industrial smoothing of our nation’s once-variegated edges has been fully accomplished, Americans may no longer need to gather at midnight on the last day of the year to yearn for their yesterdays, because wherever they are they will see the landscapes of their youths.

When they remember the Starbucks where they met the one they married or the Gap where they lost the one they didn’t, they will be marinating in memories that happened everywhere but not somewhere, reliving experiences that are located in time but dislocated in space. And when they return to the places where they grew up, or went to school, or fell in love, they may not even notice that the Old Navy has been replaced by an Abercrombie, the Fridays by an Olive Garden and the once-fleeting past by an endless present.

Ours may be the last generation of Americans to suffer for return — to remember events that took place when place still mattered. So tonight let us revel in our nostalgia, and long for the days when longing was easy.

*Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, is the host of the forthcoming television series “This Emotional Life.”*

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)