

# *A Time to Unwind*

I was no big fan of the late, great Frank Sinatra. I was of a later generation, and found other vocalists to interpret the moods of my time. Still, Sinatra was a voice of my childhood, a voice from the Magnavox that my parents turned on at the end of the day when they “unwound” with their cocktails. So I thought of him mainly as a clue, albeit an important one, to the mystery of those ritual domestic moments.

Unwinding: what a strange notion that seems now, when day’s end is a frantic transition between the workaday life and the proliferating activities of a typical family evening. Back in my wonder years—roughly coincident with the 1950s—I came to think that unwinding was an institution that went automatically with adulthood, along with jobs or den mothering. I also learned not to intrude upon it with roughhousing or too-insistent requests about dinner.

As I recall of those times, my parents mostly talked, sometimes with friends who’d dropped by (another all-but-defunct custom), but usually just to each other—or to us kids, when they asked us to join in and treated us to our own “cocktails,” complete with maraschino cherries. While we sat there, mostly seen but not heard, they’d tell stories or go over the day’s events or gossip about friends while half-listening to Ella Fitzgerald or Sinatra or one of the old big bands and sipping what now seem to me significant quantities of alcohol. The time of those times was elastic, stretching out longer on spring or summer evenings, when they often took place outdoors, while darkness fell slowly around the voices and the tinkling of ice and the swing of the music.

Thinking back on those times of unwinding—and, truly, their formal purity began to fade around 1960, with the increasing intrusiveness of the Tube, and other changes of culture as well—I probably invest them with more meaning than they had. In particular, I see them—or more accurately, hear them—as moments of symbolic distillation, little

islands of time in which experiences and feelings from my parents’ past seemed magically to resonate in the present.

It was possible, for instance, sometimes to hear echoes from as far back as the 1920s, particularly the live-for-the-moment gaiety and gregariousness, as well as the healthy contempt for prim prohibitionists and other moralists who say that you should not have fun. Certainly more audible, because closer, were the emotional strains of the Great Depression, the anxieties and uncertainties offset by something deeply sustaining: a real sense of fellow-feeling and community that grew out of the experience of shared suffering. But what came through loudest and clearest of all were the echoes of the war years, the grit and determination and solidarity—tinged, all of them, with a melancholy that came from the loss of so much life, so many lives.

In the alcohol and the music and the stories, as well as in a certain timbre of conversation and laughter, I heard resilience and relief, a happiness at having come through, accompanied by the anxious knowledge that all peace is temporary. There was also, understandably, pride and satisfaction, and even an abiding nostalgia: for at the darkest times of depression and war, my parents’ generation had grabbed hold of life and each other with an intensity they knew they would never again experience. How could they help missing those times? Yet I was amazed, too, and became even more so after living through the self-indulgent decades that followed, at how stoical they were about all that had happened and all that had been lost.

The music, perhaps even more than the stories, seemed to conjure up the deeper emotional experiences. With the opening bar of a tune—often one by Ol’ Blue Eyes—someone would say, “Remember . . .” and no more needed to be said, though there might be a complicitous wink or smile. (Didn’t Gore Vidal recently say that more than half of all baby boomers were conceived under Frank Sinatra’s influence? Fly me to the moon, indeed.) But with the romance there



also came the swells of sadness.

I am grateful for those times because they allowed me to learn something about my parents and their generation that I might not otherwise have learned—something like their inner histories. And this knowledge, inchoate as it was, proved to be a valuable corrective to much that I later read in the social commentary about them. The general point of such commentary, particularly that written during the first postwar decade, seemed to be that most members of my parents' generation lived lives of outward conformity and inner emptiness, if not desperation. From social scientists and amateur observers came dozens of labels for this condition, including "organization man" and "lonely crowd."

There was, of course, some truth to the diagnosis, and many of my own generation made a big point, at least for a part of their lives, of doing everything in their power to avoid the fate they thought had befallen their parents—and so the various Great Refusals of the '60s. But fate usually works in ironical ways. Looking back on the last half of this century, I cannot help thinking (and historian Wilfred McClay supports this suspicion in his essay on David Riesman, pp. 34–42) that even the best sociological writing from the '50s did not capture my parents' generation so much as it anticipated an emerging type—a type to which my own generation would more closely conform. We became, ironically, the people we feared our parents were, but really weren't.

They weren't because our parents entered the nascent suburban, corporate, high-tech world not only with rich pasts but with a pioneer innocence and earnestness that largely insulated them from premature soul-death. The security, the conformity, the barbecues in the backyard, the big-finned cars, the accumulating gadgetry, the Levittown-style developments—all of these aspects and tokens of Fiftyishness were not, for that generation, symptoms of spiritual moribundity. They were, in a way, the rewards at the end of a long struggle—rewards that seemed more to astonish than to deaden their recipients.

Did they become rampant materialists, as some critics suggest? I don't think so. Certainly in contrast with the wants of today's consumers, their concern for materi-

al accumulation seems positively ascetic. And this is not simply because the means were not there. It had far more to do, I believe, with the fact that they had other things to do with their time.

For that reason, too, they were not generally workaholics. For all the talk of the rat race, they were not trying to prove anything at their jobs. And though they did those jobs well, with habits learned during leaner years, they did not live for their work the way so many of my own generation do.

What, then, did they live for? Many things. But important among them was the notion of living for each other. I might idealize, but it seems to me they invested more time in sustaining their friendships, in getting together and dropping by, in writing letters, in keeping in touch.

They also had more time for real neighborliness, beginning with the fact that they tried to know who their neighbors were. Such contacts did not always lead to fast friendships, but they fostered an atmosphere of conviviality, security, even tolerance. Theirs were not simply the "dormitory communities" social critics complain about today. Their neighborhoods were real places of contact and connection.

Above all, though, that generation had more time for family life. But this was the curious thing about such family time: it was not planned or scheduled as "quality time" with the kids. In fact, it centered less upon the kids and what they were doing than upon the parents simply taking the time to be themselves, at ease, with each other. The kids more or less moved about the periphery, sometimes drifting into the middle of the adult circle but more often simply observing from the edge—seeing the good as well as the bad in their elders, and learning the hardest lesson: that the good and the bad were usually, and painfully, intermixed.

Because our parents took the time to be themselves, to unwind before us, we children had the chance to find out who they were and what had made them, and therefore to understand a good part of what was making us. It was, I learned, an invaluable lesson. How strange, then, that we who have been so determined to provide our children with every opportunity might be depriving them of the one they can least afford to miss.

—Jay Tolson