

UNITED WISDOM

Nostalgia: the past we miss

The Person and Inner Life

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *“I want to get home”.*

Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book V, Odysseus's reply to Calypso, lines 215–224; a short fragment in Samuel Butler's English prose translation. Literary homecoming is not equated with the modern psychological concept of nostalgia.

What this article is about

Imagine a hypothetical evening: a familiar song takes someone back to a summer road, the people beside them, and a sense of having plenty of time ahead. They feel warmth and a little sadness. A minute later, another thought arrives: life was real then, and now everything is ruined. There is a large step between recollection and that verdict on the present. A song can recall something valuable without establishing an entire period's quality.

Nostalgia invites an encounter with a past no longer available in its former shape. We need to distinguish what we miss: a person, place, relationship, possibility, or image of a time. We consider longing and warmth together, drawing on Wildschut and colleagues' research, Homeric homecoming, and Augustine's reflection on remembered feelings. Scientific findings, a literary scene, and religious self-understanding have different foundations. The practical question is whether recognising a past value can help us live now, without demanding complete restoration or requiring memory's abandonment.

I. What exactly calls us back?

The word “past” is too broad for one feeling. In a hypothetical example, someone says they miss university, but clarification reveals memories of long conversations after classes rather than lectures or exams. Another misses a city they left long ago, particularly the habit of walking without hurry. These possibilities do not establish a universal structure of nostalgia. They suggest a useful question: which element of experience carries significance when someone summarises it through the name of a period or place?

Sometimes the answer involves a particular person who cannot be replaced by new surroundings. Sometimes it involves a rhythm of life partly available today. Sometimes it concerns a possibility once open and now understood differently. We should not translate all these cases into one need in advance. Clarification matters when it preserves differences and

lets someone recognise their own situation. “You miss security” can be just as broad an explanation as “I miss those years” if security has not itself been considered.

It helps to separate a recollection's object from a wish to return. A hypothetical reader may love an old house without wanting to live again in former relationships. They may treasure friendship without wishing to repeat the entire student lifestyle. This is not a contradiction that needs removal. Different parts of the past matter differently. Valuing one and rejecting another makes an account more precise. It also protects someone from a demand to accept everything together merely because they acknowledged that something in that time was dear to them.

A concrete question gives nostalgia a clearer object. Instead of a final conclusion about a lost life, a sentence becomes possible: “I miss conversations where nobody was rushing.” It does not yet solve the problem, but enables a next step. Present conditions for conversation can be discussed without proving that an entire former period was better. Respect for the past here consists in attentive precision rather than an obligation to turn it into a standard the present can never meet.

II. Warmth and sadness can concern the same story

A nostalgic recollection need not have only one emotional colour. In a hypothetical situation, someone smiles at a photograph while noticing the absence of a person once beside them. Warmth concerns the connection that existed; sadness concerns its present unavailability. These experiences can coexist without cancelling each other. Someone need not decide whether a recollection was pleasant or unpleasant to be entitled to describe it. Sometimes the question itself is too coarse for an experience where value and loss are joined through the same story.

In Book X of *Confessions*, Augustine distinguishes an earlier feeling from the feeling while remembering it: someone can recall joy in sadness or earlier sadness with joy. This is reflection on inner life within a Christian search for God. It cannot be presented as an experimental regularity for everyone. A limited comparison shows that a present relationship to the past need not reproduce its emotional state. Remembering a happy day and feeling sad now does not mean that one of the feelings contains an error.

Imagine a hypothetical reader irritated by their own longing: “If the time was good, I should feel happy rather than sad.” That demand adds judgement over experience. More carefully, both layers can be named: a precious event happened, and it cannot be repeated with the same people. This is the authors' distinction, rather than an instruction to manage emotions in a prescribed way. It promises no immediate relief. It simply makes the description less conflicted, without turning a mixed feeling into evidence of weakness or an improper attitude to one's life.

A caring conversational response can also preserve both sides. We need not immediately insist that everything ahead is better or join in declaring everything valuable lost. We can hear what was dear and what is absent now. If someone does not wish to discuss details, that remains their choice. Mixed feeling does not require a compulsory, exhaustive explanation. It can be acknowledged as present experience without treating acknowledgement as proof of every detail's accuracy or as a solution to the question of the future.

III. What Wildschut and colleagues studied

In Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt and Routledge's 2006 research, seven studies considered nostalgia's content, triggers, and functions. Accounts included close others and significant events. Experiments comparing recollection of nostalgic and ordinary events found differences in some subsequent self-reported measures of connection, self-regard, and positive feelings. These are findings under specified conditions, rather than proof that every turn towards the past is beneficial or that relationships actually changed outside the laboratory.

The boundary between reporting experience and behaviour matters. Feeling closer to people after a task does not automatically establish that a conversation occurred, a friendship was restored, or a conflict disappeared. That transition needs other information. “Benefit” therefore requires explanation: for which measure, in which study, and at what moment? Several positive findings cannot become an obligation to practise nostalgia. Still less can someone be told they remember incorrectly if their own experience is more complicated or brings no expected relief.

Nor does the research settle a nostalgic story's accuracy. Considering emotional functions is not independent verification of every event participants described. A hypothetical person can feel warmth from an account while its date still needs clarification. Or remember an event accurately without feeling warmth. Meaning, feeling, and factual correspondence should not be added together into one memory-quality score. Each question has its own basis and deserves separate consideration, especially when an account becomes an argument about other people.

The authors' inference is moderate: nostalgia need not be dismissed beforehand as a useless retreat from life, but its significance cannot be declared beneficial for everyone in advance. Someone can notice their own consequences: does a recollection reveal a valued connection, invite action, or leave room for the present? These are everyday questions rather than an independent replication of a research procedure. They help assess a particular application without presenting it as a scientific test or replacing a research picture with a universal promise of improvement.

IV. Odysseus returns to relationships, rather than an ideal picture

In Book V of *The Odyssey*, the hero replies to Calypso: he understands the difference between an immortal goddess and mortal Penelope but wants to go home. The literary scene depicts a wish to return that cannot be reduced to choosing the most beautiful outward image. Yet we do not diagnose the hero with a modern term or treat the poem as a scientific account of nostalgia. Homer's world of gods, dangers, and home has its own structure; careful reading retains historical and genre distance.

For our discussion, the scene raises a question of belonging. In a hypothetical situation, someone may prefer a familiar place not because it is objectively more convenient than any other, but because relationships and personal history are connected there. That choice need not be irrational. Acknowledging belonging, however, does not mean accepting every former condition or returning at any cost. We transfer only the question, rather than the hero's fate: what makes a place home, and which obligations or connections does that word contain for a particular person?

Return should not be romanticised as simple restoration. An adult reader might visit a familiar city and find that streets, relationships, and they themselves have changed. This is a hypothetical example rather than evidence of universal disappointment. It distinguishes a past home in memory from a present place of encounter. Return can be enjoyed without requiring literal correspondence. A trip can also be declined if its cost is excessive. Love for a recollection need not express itself through one prescribed action that others declare the only authentic return.

Nostalgia gains substance when belonging does not become exclusivity. My family's cherished history does not prove other families lived less correctly. A beloved city does not establish a new place's inferiority. A hypothetical person can recognise old forms of warmth and gradually find others without calling the new a betrayal. Homer's scene does not require this modern conclusion; it belongs to the article's authors. The scene makes visible a choice of connection that cannot be judged solely by a place's attractiveness, yet still requires responsibility in the present.

V. A good recollection does not assess an entire period

Personal recollection and historical judgement operate at different scales. In a hypothetical situation, someone says “People helped one another then”, recalling neighbours' support. That help may have been real and important. But one circle of relationships does not establish how everyone lived then. Assessing a period requires other sources and questions. Gratitude to particular neighbours can be preserved without turning it into evidence of the past's overall superiority. A conclusion's scale should match the scale of information actually available to the speaker.

It is particularly easy to overlook people whose experience is absent from a cherished story. A hypothetical family account of a happy celebration may omit someone who felt excluded. Their report need not destroy the occasion's value for everyone else, but it makes a collective “We all enjoyed it” less definite. It helps to ask whose “we” appears and who can qualify it. Respect for a shared past includes different testimony rather than requiring everyone to confirm a convenient version to maintain the family mood.

Yet not every warm memory should be declared idealisation in advance. Someone may accurately remember a particular good event. Doubt becomes useful when it has an object: a forgotten difficulty, an enlarged conclusion, another person's report, or an examinable detail. “You just embellished it” is as poorly grounded universally as “Everything was better then.” It can close a conversation before material is considered. Precision is needed in both directions: neither enlarge a memory to cover an era nor devalue it merely because it contains warmth.

In practical language, this means allowing personal accounts to remain personal. “I treasure the way we gathered in that house” communicates a relationship and experience. “All of life was better then” requires much more. Sometimes the second phrase is figurative; clarify whether a historical debate is really intended. If a present decision matters, turn the generalisation into an element: a shared table, mutual help, available time. Memory then returns attention to a value without requiring proof that it existed exclusively within one span of history.

VI. What cannot return, and what can be preserved

Nostalgia encounters irreversibility. In a hypothetical example, someone wants another evening with the former family gathering, but a loved one has died, others live far away, and the old house has been sold. We cannot promise that the right ritual restores that evening. Acknowledging impossibility does not require abandoning the connection's value. A photograph, recipe, or story can be treasured without presenting a preserved sign as the event's return. The distinction respects loss instead of concealing it behind an easy promise of repetition.

Sometimes preserving a value takes a new form. A hypothetical person cooks a familiar dish with a child and explains who once prepared it. This is a new evening rather than an exact copy of the old one. It has its own participants and can matter in its own way. The child should not be required to feel the same nostalgia or confirm that the earlier version was better. Passing on a story becomes respectful when it leaves another person room for their own response rather than requiring a prescribed reaction to sustain an elder's feelings.

Some values cannot simply be transferred. A particular person is not replaceable by a general need for company, and a lost relationship is not necessarily restored through a new acquaintance. Translating loss too quickly into “Find the same thing now” removes its uniqueness. Our practical question therefore allows the answer “This can be preserved only in memory.” That answer does not make life meaningless. It honestly names a connection's form and enables present choices without requiring them to prove that the past never really went away.

Nor does everything new have to answer to the past. A hypothetical meeting with friends can be good without producing an earlier feeling. Comparison sometimes reveals a wish and sometimes obscures the present's independent value. One emotional yardstick need not be imposed. An old story can be kept while a new one develops without an immediate contest. Preservation and development then stop being mutually exclusive commands: each receives an object, form, and limit that need not be hidden for an attractive promise of continuity.

VII. Nostalgia does not require renewed contact

A warm recollection of someone is not automatically a decision to renew a relationship. In a hypothetical situation, a person misses good conversations with a former partner while remembering serious reasons for separation. Both accounts can be true within their limits. Longing alone cannot create an obligation to return. Present contact depends on consent, conditions, safety, and available information about what changed. Feeling speaks to a former connection's significance without establishing another participant's readiness for a new one.

A part of a relationship can be cherished while a boundary remains. This is especially important if the past included harm. The article does not determine a case's clinical or legal circumstances or propose testing a dangerous relationship through an independent experiment. Its general boundary is simpler: nostalgia does not cancel known reasons for caution. A hypothetical person need not prove that every former moment was bad to be entitled to decline contact. A good episode's meaning does not become consent to repeat other conditions.

Even where contact is sufficiently safe and desired, it should be considered a new action. A hypothetical friend may write a short message while respecting the possibility of no reply. But

that is their decision rather than the article's demand. Another person's response may be warm, restrained, or absent; none automatically changes the earlier time's significance. An old recollection belongs to a former relationship, while a present conversation belongs to present participants. The distinction protects both from a role one person assigned the other in a story of return.

Practical clarity avoids a forced choice between action and suppressing feeling. Someone can miss a person, describe something valuable, treasure an object, and send no message. They can write without demanding restoration of former closeness. They may discover that they want to retain a story without its other protagonist's involvement. Nostalgia supplies no single correct behaviour. It becomes one consideration alongside others. Responsibility consists in choosing an action according to present conditions rather than proving loyalty to the past at any cost.

VIII. When the present becomes a permanent loser

In a hypothetical situation, someone compares every present evening with one particularly vivid recollection. Ordinary tiredness meets a selected moment of closeness, and the present always loses. Logically, the comparison is uneven: a whole difficult day is set against one treasured scene. We are not claiming that all nostalgia operates this way. But a particular conversation can identify which units are compared. Otherwise a verdict on present life's quality arrives before its own possibilities and constraints have been considered.

Sometimes it is more useful to ask what needs attention now. A hypothetical person misses leisurely weekends while working without enough rest. Recollection can help name a missing rhythm without proving that rest exists only in the past. The next question concerns present conditions: schedules, obligations, available help, and wishes. Memory can supply a conversational subject, while a solution is sought in the present. It may be small or difficult; no beautiful recollection guarantees its feasibility on its own.

Longing also need not immediately become an improvement project. If someone simply wants to share a dear story, their listener need not assign a task. Listening can leave subsequent choice open. Memory's practical value is not measured solely through productivity. Conversely, if someone notices comparison hindering ordinary life, the actual consequences merit discussion rather than diagnosis through the word “nostalgia”. The article establishes no cause of that state and does not propose treating it with memories.

A proportionate approach holds two possibilities together: the past may support attention to value, while a particular form of comparison may close off the present. Decisions depend neither on general praise nor a general prohibition of nostalgia. Consider what happens for the particular person and their actions. If independent understanding is insufficient and difficulties

continue, suitable support can be sought. This does not first require proving a recollection wrong or choosing a diagnosis; honestly naming a difficulty and its significance for life is enough.

IX. Passing on the past without requiring equal love

A dear story becomes shared through telling, but its emotional meaning does not transfer as an instruction. In a hypothetical family, an adult shows old photographs and expects identical enthusiasm from children. They may be interested in the people without longing for a time they never inhabited. That is not necessarily indifference. Their experience and relationship to the images differ. Hearing a story or asking questions has value without requiring confirmation of an identical degree of love for the past.

A story's origins should remain visible. If a hypothetical adult learned an event from their parents, they can name that source. If they participated, they can separate recollection from later clarification. A transmitted story then has clear layers rather than forming one indivisible family conviction. Someone else can understand what is established, assumed, and dear to the teller. Such clarity does not make an encounter cold. It combines warmth with honesty without turning respect for relatives into an obligation to accept every historical conclusion.

Transmission also allows new forms. A hypothetical family might retain a recipe while changing a celebration to suit current participants. This is not necessarily rejection of tradition. Yet change should be discussed rather than automatically declared correct or treacherous. History explains a form's origins; continuing it requires participation today. Respect for the past and present people's consent have different roles. Neither should remove the other's voice, especially when customary arrangements cause someone difficulty.

In broader conversations, the same boundary applies to generations and cultures. Someone can describe a cherished world without making it everyone's emotional norm. Another story may reveal similarities: a wish for connection, a remembered place, a rhythm of shared life. It will also show differences of conditions and meaning. United Wisdom seeks clarity through comparison while retaining the right not to coincide. One person's nostalgia does not prove that everyone should return to the same place or understand the past in the same words.

X. A past value can participate in a new action

A nostalgic conversation need not end in return. In a hypothetical situation, someone recognises that they miss attentive presence around a shared table. They can try creating one unhurried meeting now. This is a new action rather than restoration of an era or proof that research predicted its outcome. Today's participants have their own wishes. The past therefore supplies a reference point while conditions are agreed in the present. A value survives through attentive participation in what is possible, rather than through an exact copy.

Sometimes a suitable step is preservation rather than change. A hypothetical reader labels photographs, records a family object's origin, or carefully keeps a letter. Such work may sustain intergenerational connection without requiring publication of a personal history. Not every treasured recollection must become shared material. People can agree what information travels and to whom. Responsibility for an account includes others whose faces and circumstances appear in it. Love for the past does not remove their present right to their own relationship with that story.

There is also a right to leave a question without action. Someone may hear a song, feel warmth and sadness, and continue the evening. Maturity need not be proved by rejecting feeling or extracting a productive lesson. Memory should not become an obligation determining the next choice in advance. Sometimes it recalls connection, sometimes opens a question, sometimes remains a brief visit to a treasured scene. These possibilities cannot be ranked by one measure before considering the situation, person's wishes, and consequences for their life.

The past we miss need not be entirely ideal to have value. The present need not repeat it to deserve attention. A conversation between them is possible: what was dear, what is actually lost, what can be preserved, and which new forms are available now? Our conclusion belongs to the authors' practical reasoning rather than a universal law of nostalgia. Memory helps when its object and boundary become clearer. Respect for a lived life can then coexist with freedom to choose the life that continues.

What this means in practice

Choose an ordinary treasured recollection you wish to approach voluntarily. Do not demand a prescribed feeling. Name what matters: a person, form of conversation, place, activity, or possibility. Separately identify what cannot return. This question is not designed to retrieve lost memory or independently interpret distressing experience.

Distinguish three assertions: “This was dear to me”, “Everything was better then”, and “I want to repeat it now”. The first proves neither the second nor an obligation to the third. If you wish

to act, choose a small step considering present participants. In a hypothetical example, you can suggest a quiet dinner without requiring others to reproduce an earlier mood.

Then consider actual consequences: is the wish clearer, does the action fit, and does room remain for the present? A story can be retained without contact, a tradition's form changed, or no action taken. Research promises no identical benefit for everyone. If comparisons with the past continue hindering ordinary life, discuss the difficulty and available support without diagnosing yourself merely because longing is present.

Key quotation

> *"...can think of nothing else".*

Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book V, the same reply to Calypso, lines 215–224; a short fragment in Samuel Butler's translation. A strong wish to return belongs to a literary hero. It does not establish how a contemporary reader should act or erase distinctions between home, a past time, and present relationships.

Connections between traditions

Approach	What is compared	Similarity	Limit of the comparison
Wildschut and colleagues	Nostalgia's content and functions	Memory relates to one's attitude towards self and others	Changed self-report does not establish changed actual relationships
Homer, The Odyssey	Wishing to return home	A valued connection is more than outward attractiveness	Literary return is not the modern psychological concept
Augustine, Confessions	An earlier feeling and its recollection	Present experience need not copy the earlier state	Christian self-understanding is not a laboratory model
Family transmission	Preserving forms and involving new people	A past value can enter a new action	Respect for history does not require identical feelings or agreement with every conclusion
The authors' position	Proportionate preservation and choice	The past can be treasured while the present matters	The practice does not recover lost events or replace support for serious difficulties

Primary sources and research

• Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Jamie Arndt, Clay Routledge. Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions, 2006. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91(5), 975–993. The abstract, introduction, Study 5 method, selected methods and results of Studies 6–7, and relevant General Discussion sections were read. Findings are used within measures and procedures; underlying data were not independently reanalysed.

• Homer. The Odyssey, Samuel Butler prose translation. Project Gutenberg. Book V: the passage on staying with Calypso, wishing to return, and speaking to her was read; quotations belong to the reply in V.215–224. The English version calls the hero Ulysses; Russian uses Odysseus. The translator's introductory hypotheses about authorship are not adopted as established facts.

• Augustine. The Confessions, Edward Bouverie Pusey translation. Project Gutenberg. Book X, especially X.14.21: the discussion of remembered feelings was read within the Christian search for God. Used for a limited comparison without another quotation from this text.

Tags

nostalgia, past, memory, recollection, longing, warmth, sadness, home, belonging, relationships, loss, present, return, self-understanding, Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, Routledge, Homer, Odyssey, Odysseus, Calypso, Augustine, Confessions, family history, tradition, consent, boundaries, choice, United Wisdom

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.