

When nostalgia becomes prophecy: an omened vignette

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Sometimes 'minor' historic observations tell us of very major changes we have undergone but not yet apprehended. Here is one.

I am at a retirement ceremony of a long-serving and much-liked colleague. Another veteran cohort, John, has come to appreciate and celebrate. John tells me he served a full term as Professor of Medicine until his own retirement ten years ago.

Toward the end of an afternoon of social circulation John and I again gravitate toward one another – an affinity of generation and experience.

‘You know, doctors don’t talk like they used to...’ he says wistfully when rejoining me.

‘John, that’s equally interesting and enigmatic. What do you mean?’, I ask.

‘Well, when doctors used to get together socially they would usually want to talk about some kind of science or humanity: things or events or people that they didn’t understand, or that moved them, or led them to a sense of wonder, or to some substantial rethinking...’

‘And now?’ I urge him on.

‘What I hear now is mostly quite different. Talk has become much more abstract and institutional. Doctors now talk of money, plots, schemes and strategies, systems and IT, political manoeuvrings, who’s in and who’s out ... And then I hear those who are tired of all this: their disaffection, their stoic endurance, their cynically battered idealism – *it’s a rotten system, but I’ll do my best*. That’s what they seem to be saying. Am I making sense?’

‘Yes, very much. That’s one of the most succinct analyses I’ve ever heard’, I say, brief in my esteem.

‘Well, from what I can see, such a culture bodes poorly for all our futures. I’ll just have to make sure I don’t get ill in my old age.’ John’s ironic, absurd jest, of course, carries a grim warning for us all.

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