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McAlister: The significance of tradition

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The passing scene at the end of the 21st century's second decade provides us with a number of snapshots, not altogether pleasing to the thoughtful observer.

One of our major political parties is moving quickly to embrace overt socialism as its default philosophy, while singing siren songs of Medicare-for-All, the Green New Deal, free college tuition and other fantasies to enthrall the gullible, especially among the miseducated young. Polls in the past few years have suggested that socialism is more popular than free markets among the college crowd, though it turns out that many who are wowed by it can't actually define it.

Meanwhile, the First Amendment is not considered an inviolable principle by a disturbing number of students, according to a 2017 Cato Institute survey that found 51 percent of current students were opposed to free speech if they considered it disrespectful.

Sociologist Jean Twenge calls the current crop of young people the "i-Gen" generation, because they have never known a time before the omnipresent smartphone. These "digital natives" have also never seen a time in which conceptions of gender and sexuality were not all over the map. Perhaps the ubiquity of dyed hair and deliberately ripped jeans owe something to the fact these young men and women have grown up in a society in which little in life, if anything, is coherent.

There are many theories as to why and how our society has reached this point. Helicopter parenting has certainly played a role in creating a spoiled and insecure generation who are risk-averse and hypersensitive, not to mention much less likely to crack open a book. The decline in quality of what passes for public education is also a culprit, and the ongoing decay of familial bonds is another. But in general, the postmodern emphasis on subjective feelings and an ever-amorphous notion of equality looms very large, as does the decline of religious obligation. Meanwhile, disorder reigns, and chaos is the status quo.

In the midst of this social and cultural free-fall, those of us who incline toward the permanent things and wish to set our society on a more stable footing tend to look to the past in a quest for community and roots. It is not that we see any past age as pristine; no age has been perfect since our first parents were expelled from Eden. But those of us who seek the good, the true, and the beautiful, if we are wise, recognize that we ourselves did not invent the three transcendentals.

As a wise man, perhaps Fulbert of Chartres, once said, we are but dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants. What is good and worthwhile in our Western and Judeo-Christian heritage, to the extent it remains with us, is there because of many past generations who contributed to the lineaments of our society and culture long before we were born.

At the same time, we must confront the fact that many of the ills that plague a large portion of our young people are not solely because of their own choices, but also because their elders have dropped the ball. Those who raise children in this age must realize the enormity of their calling.

So we return to the vital concept of tradition, or the passing down of what is worthwhile. But this should be more than thoughtless repetition. As T. S. Eliot reminded us, "Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor." A more recent writer put things paradoxically: tradition is for the young. You may want to stop and think about that one.