

# Longing for the good old days in medicine

by Dean Gianakos, MD

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 I used to feel badly about longing for the good old days in medicine until my sister referred me to a *New York Times* article touting the mental health benefits of nostalgia.<sup>1</sup> At one time, nostalgia—the sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past—was considered a psychiatric disorder closely associated with melancholia or depression. Although it is often triggered by feelings of loneliness or loss, new research suggests nostalgia can act as a compensatory mechanism to boost optimism, social connectedness, and self-continuity. It can help individuals to discover meaning in life.<sup>2,3</sup>

In the article, Dr. Constantine Sedikides relates how his own sentimentality for the University of North Carolina inspired him to study nostalgia. Shortly after moving to the University of Southampton in 1999, Sedikides experienced nostalgia for North Carolina (“memories of old friends, Tar Heel basketball games, fried okra”). A colleague at Southampton thought he was depressed. Sedikides thought otherwise:

I told him I did live my life forward, but sometimes I couldn't help thinking about the past, and it was rewarding. Nostalgia made me feel that my life had roots and

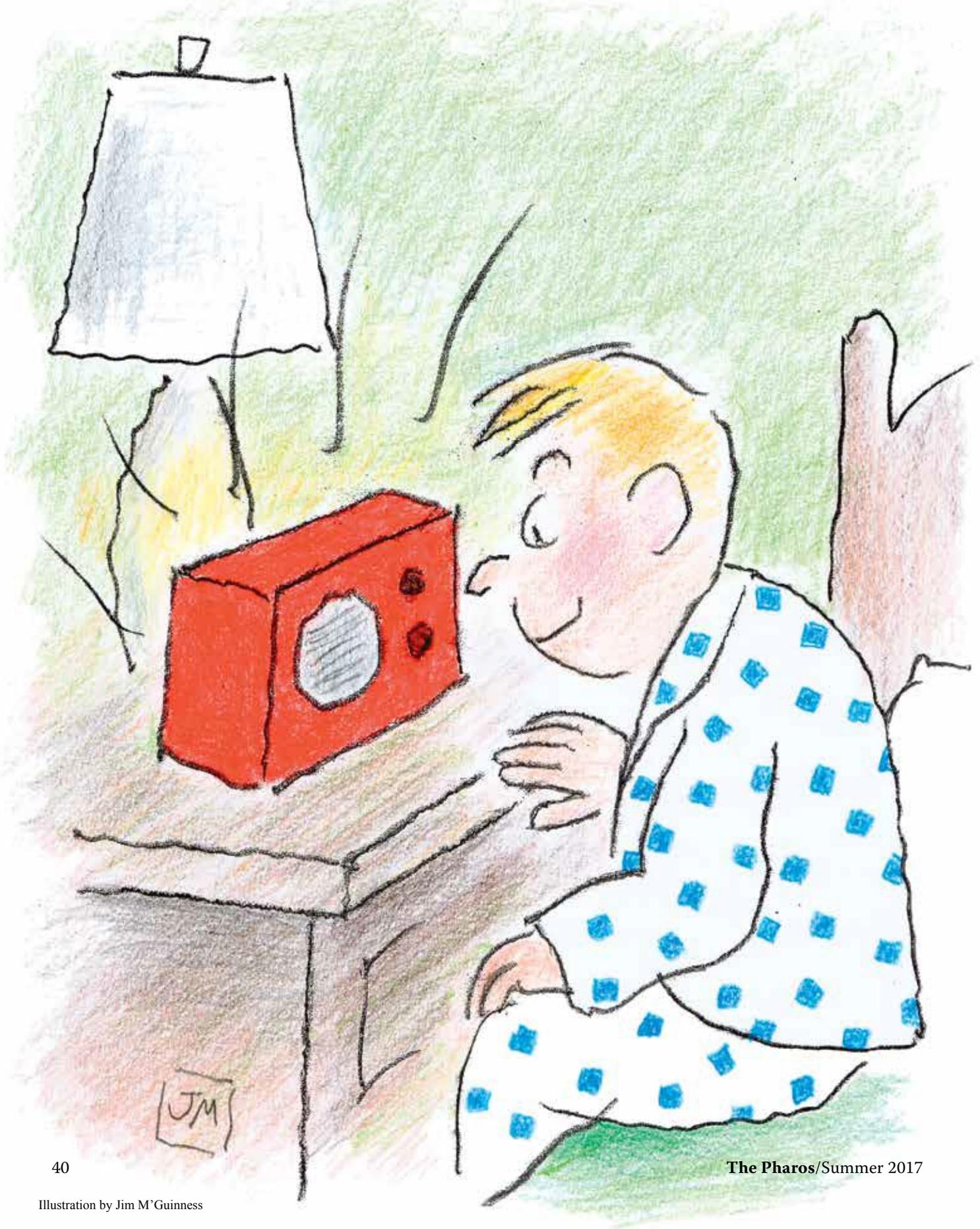
continuity. It made me feel good about myself and my relationships. It provided a texture to my life and gave me strength to move forward.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1999, Sedikides and others have contributed to a growing body of science that supports his personal experience of nostalgia:

Regarded throughout centuries as a psychological ailment, nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength. It is part of the fabric of everyday life and serves at least four key psychological functions. It generates positive affect, elevates self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threat. By so doing so, nostalgia can help one to navigate successfully the vicissitudes of daily life.<sup>3</sup>

Social scientists are not the only ones writing positive things about nostalgia. In his poem “Radio,” Louis Jenkins recalls the bittersweet experience of listening to far away radio stations in the middle of the night:

When I was a kid I listened to the radio at night. I tuned it low as I could and put my ear right up next to it because my dad didn't like it. He'd say, “Turn off that radio. It's after midnight!” No matter how low I tuned it he could still



hear, from down the hall and through two closed doors. He was tired. It had been a long day and this was just one more thing, the final thing, keeping him from the sleep, the absolute dead silence he wanted. As for me, whatever music I was listening to, some rock station way down on the border, probably, “100,000 watts of pure power,” has become even more faint over the years. But I can still hear it.<sup>4</sup>

The father in the poem works long days. He is awake after midnight. Perhaps he has regrets, wishing he didn’t have a day job that causes him to toss at night. The faint noise of his son’s radio is one more thing, “the final thing,” keeping him up.

It may be after midnight in the life of the father, but it is morning in the life of the boy—full of promise, possibility, and opportunity. The narrator recalls being wide awake, with his ear to the radio. He is excited by the words and music of disc jockeys in far off places, imagining what it’s like to be living in a big city near the border.

“Radio” is a metaphor for the mind. It broadcasts memories to the narrator, connecting him to his present life. The memories are bittersweet. Maybe he sees a little of himself in his father, beaten down by life. Yet, he still has pleasant memories of excitement and power, memories that connect him to the past in an optimistic, self-affirming way.

When I first read this poem, it brought back a similar memory for me: listening to rock and roll at sleepovers with my best friend from elementary school. We were thrilled to pick up stations like WABC in New York, and WLS in Chicago, tempting us to keep listening, despite the commands of our mothers and fathers. I still hear the faint music now, bringing me back to another time in my life—simpler, innocent, and full of possibilities. Remembering my friend, the radio, the music, and the house still gives me warm feelings of connection and continuity.

Jenkins’ poem evokes the same positive feelings that Sedikides and other social scientists are finding in their research on nostalgia.

Like many middle-aged physicians, I occasionally long for the days when I was able to spend more time with my patients. I recall breaking away from the office to attend a 104th birthday party for a patient in a nursing home. Fifty nursing home residents and I watched her blow out birthday candles from her wheelchair. One year later, I delivered a eulogy at her funeral.

Another nostalgic memory is counting pills on a kitchen table in the tiny apartment of a patient who had

lost her ability to count. And, walking out to the office parking lot to examine a favorite patient who was too sick to walk to me.

The sights and sounds of these wonderful patients—hundreds of them—have become fainter over the years, but I can still see and hear them. They make me feel good about what I do. They also remind me that memories are not created in the electronic health record, they are created in relationships.

Of course, it would be unhealthy to spend all my days longing for the good old days in medicine. Besides, I’m too busy creating new memories with patients, residents, students, family, and friends. Science and poetry now assure me this is a healthy thing to do—occasional nostalgia builds social connections, continuity, and meaning in one’s life.

In his great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky draws a similar conclusion:

You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days...<sup>5</sup>

## References

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