



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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What was gained and what was lost

I went to a wake in Woodside the other night. A good friend of mine lost his grandmother a few months shy of her 106th birthday. As soon as I stepped into the funeral home, I could tell this family matriarch was revered and was going to be sorely missed, but there was a celebratory air about the place, a proverbial “Irish wake” with joy and laughter for a life well lived.

As I sat listening to her family and friends, I got to thinking about just how much this remarkable life had seen. Born in 1906, she’d witnessed the development of almost all of the technological advancements that shape our world. She was there for the development of radio, telephone, television, the instant camera, the washing machine, gas-ovens, and a new-fangled thing called the “icebox.” She observed the rise of motor cars and mechanized flight. She watched as we developed the atomic bomb, broke the sound barrier and put a man on the moon. She marveled at computers and in her later years she spoke to far-away family on their smart phones while looking at their photos via the internet, all thanks to the miracle of satellites.

She was a witness to history as well. She lived through Teddy Roosevelt and tales of his Rough-Riders, his cousin FDR's fireside chats, the assassination of John Kennedy and then his brother Bobby. She saw Dr. Martin Luther King lead the civil rights movement and undo the segregation that divided us only to be assassinated himself. Then years later, she watched as the first African-American, Barack Obama, was sworn into the Oval Office. She endured the Great Depression, saw two punishing world wars, Korea, Vietnam and every military action in-between. She was there for Hitler and the Holocaust, Stalin and Communism, the bombing of Hiroshima and the rebuilding of Europe. She made it through the Cold War and watched the Berlin Wall crumble. She saw farms become big cities, science wipe out Polio and then even test tube babies. And to think, there were only 45 states when she was born!

As a Senator, I have the pleasure of meeting with seniors just like her and hearing their reflections on how mightily the world has changed. I am admittedly fascinated by their descriptions. They marveled at the wonders of science, shuddered at world events and, through it all, managed to keep it in perspective. They've seen so much in their many years that they can look back with an understanding that comes only with experience – experience we who are younger can't even begin to grasp. One would think they have much to say about how far we've come.

Yet, listen to them carefully and you'll find that they, in their wisdom, are more concerned about what's been lost than what's been gained. Hear them lament (for us younger folks) our loss of time, privacy and our sense of who we are. They miss the culture of family-life and tight-knit neighborhoods that gave way to hyper-individualism and anonymity. They regret that we've collectively given up the luxury of leisure for the convenience of speed; that we've traded in home-cooked meals for fast food. Most notably, they seem to unanimously agree that our country somehow swapped the civility, optimism, and unity that defined us for

jaded partisanship and negativity.

Just ask any one of them. National debts, wars, recessions, terrorism and the ozone layer don't frighten them. They've seen it all and survived it all. Rather, what disturbs them is that kindness and courtesy seem to have given way to anger and rudeness in our national discourse.

All the world's great cultures treasure their seniors. They put them up on pedestals and cherish their knowledge and insight. We should do the same and listen to them carefully. In doing so, perhaps we may still recover what we've lost.