

Summer the Way It Should Be

Ada Calhoun ASKS: WHAT IS IT ABOUT LIFE IN THE 21ST CENTURY THAT MAKES US LONG FOR KICK THE CAN, MARSHMALLOW SALAD, AND A PHONE WITH A CORD?



I'D BEEN ON MY computer all day. I stood in my kitchen waiting for the second batch of healthy, if bland, chicken with tahini and asparagus to be done. I refilled our dinner guests' drinks. There were no fewer than five children underfoot—my 10-year-old son plus several friends ages 6 to 12. One came in complaining of a sore throat. I put on a movie for the kids and reminded them not to share cups.

"What's new?" my friend asked, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"Well," I said, pausing to think for the first time all week. "I spent all of yesterday helping my grandmother move. We've had houseguests nonstop. I have endless work projects lined up but still feel broke. Whenever I'm not working, I'm cooking and cleaning. This is the first time I've had a conversation in days without being interrup—"

"Can I have some water?" a 6-year-old yelled from the other room.

"You need a break," my friend said.

"I tried!" I said. "I went to visit my best friend last weekend when I was in her town for a conference. Within hours, she got called away for work and left me alone to dog-sit."

The whole time we were talking, both of us had phones vibrating; behind our eyes was a swirl of stress.

Mostly, I like my 2017 life. I'm happy to cut up cucumbers for kids and have a career, go to parties and Pilates and...and yet I've started to wonder whether it hasn't gone a little far, all this *doing*. I consider the similar plight of my son and his friends, scheduled like little Olympians in training: chess, soccer, band, science camp, theater camp, 4-H camp.

When I was a kid, my cousin and I would climb the hill behind my aunt and uncle's house. We never remembered to bring a compass, sunscreen, or water. If memory serves, we subsisted for weeks on Pop-Tarts carried in our pockets. We swam and climbed and sometimes rounded out the day by throwing leeches or shooting bottle rockets at each other. We returned hours later, usually covered in mud and scratched by brambles. If we didn't feel like going outside, we watched ungodly amounts of television (whatever was on, we didn't care—*Woody Woodpecker*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Jeopardy*) and ate white bread with butter and sugar. All the while, our moms, in their wedges and flowy wrap skirts, mostly left us alone. That was the 1970s and early '80s in a nutshell: parents off...somewhere, kids wild and free. The busier I get, the more appealing it seems.

Judging by the ongoing '70s fashion revival (even Forever 21 now stocks terry cloth rompers) and the way the era keeps popping up in movies (*American Hustle*), books (*City on Fire*), songs (check out the viral video "We Didn't Own an iPad" if you aren't among the millions who have watched it already), and blog posts (Melissa Fenton penned a tribute to '70s parenting that went viral a few summers back), I'm not the only one feeling nostalgic. I wasn't surprised to see the mildest-mannered PTA moms doing shots and dancing like crazy to "I Will Survive" in gold lamé and glitter eye shadow at the recent 1970s-themed fundraising gala at my son's school.

I wonder if '70s nostalgia might have something to do with a desire to relax about what we eat, how much TV we watch, and how quickly we respond when summoned by our devices. Maybe we're weary of living our best lives and longing to embrace the good-enough life—that more laid-back approach to food, fashion, and parenting that America perfected in the 1970s.

Granted, the decade was far from idyllic: There was Watergate, lines at the gas pump, a stagnant economy—not to mention fashion's overreliance on fabrics not found in nature. Katherine Spillar, executive editor of *Ms.* magazine, notes that women are better off now by just about every metric. In the '70s, women made up less than 5 percent of Congress, there were no women on the Supreme Court, and unmarried women could be denied everything from birth control to credit cards.

Yet I find myself fondly remembering sugared bread. How can we give ourselves a '70s makeover, minus the bad stuff? For me, it all begins with hot dogs and watermelon.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: I have to stop with the labor-intensive meals. When women started working in large numbers, the Crock-Pot was hailed as a solution. Parents could throw meat and vegetables into the machine when they left for work and arrive home to serve the family a hot meal.

I locate the slow cooker I was given years ago but never use. One morning, I put a pork shoulder in it with onions, garlic, a bunch of spices, and other vegetables. Five hours later, the house smells fantastic. That night, friends come over for dinner, and my low-labor carnitas tacos are a hit. Better still, in the predinner hour, I'm able to sit in the living room and talk to people.

So this, I think, is why my mom and others of her generation were so partial to convenience foods like Banquet boiling bags, Rice-A-Roni, Pasta-Roni, Manwich, and Hamburger Helper. They might not have been the healthiest or most delicious options, but they were fast and let you more quickly move on to what made family dinners enjoyable in the first place: spending time together.

Anna Pallai of the 70s Dinner Party Twitter account (@70s_party) admits that a lot of '70s food was pretty gross—particularly the salads, which "aren't really salads at all but often vegetables in lime gelatin and lots of mayonnaise." What the era got right, she notes, was convenience and fun. She points to some of its ridiculous yet endearing trends: Roast hot dogs and shape them into a crown with toothpicks; put something in the middle! Want to have a fancy party with no plates to wash? Get a fondue pot and have everyone dip their own food. Want a silverware-free side? Slice a watermelon. Err on the side of sweetness and ease. "When in doubt," says Pallai, "add marshmallows."

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PREVIOUS SPREAD AND THIS SPREAD: FAMILY, CLASSICSTOCK/ALAMY; POLAROID: GETTY IMAGES



Afternoon bike ride 1978

One way to have convenience with somewhat less processing and added sugar: Create your own fast food. “I’m seeing some people make their own TV dinners,” says Jenn Matheson, PhD, a marriage and family therapist who practices in Colorado and Wyoming. “On weekends they go to the grocery store with their kids, buy all the stuff they’re going to need for the week, cook it, package it up, stick it in the freezer. During the week, take it out, microwave it, and you’ve got nutritious food that you’ve made together. And you have time to run outside before the sun goes down and play catch or hide-and-go-seek before the fireflies come out.”

IN 1975, Elia Parsons and Marguerite Kelly published *The Mother’s Almanac*, seeking to “de-escalate the idea that you have to be an expert to raise a child,” as Parsons once said. They advocated relaxing and enjoying one another’s company. That means more unstructured time. My mother, who was working as a young actress in the 1970s, is not nostalgic for much about the decade (she still has flashbacks to sexist bosses), but she has long encouraged more downtime for her grandson. “It’s good for him,” she says when I fret about his getting too much screen time or sugar. “It didn’t kill you.”

FAMILY, TOM KELLEY ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; POLAROIDS, GETTY IMAGES

When I look back at my own abundant screen time, though, I do see one key difference: Whereas today my son is on his iPad and my husband and I are on our individual phones, back then vegging out was a group activity.

“In the ‘70s, a lot of middle- to working-class families had only one TV,” says Matheson. “What did we do? We planned our time so we would gather around it to watch something in common. Binge-watching series is mind-numbing. The old way was better: Pick an episode one evening every week, usually after dinner. Pop some popcorn, sit down, and watch together.”

My husband and son and I try this. We become addicted to *The Voice*. We chatter through the whole show, mostly about how we all like Alicia Keys best. I realize that what’s important is being around one another and sharing activities, whether that’s watching the same show or playing Clue. We start going outside together more. I teach my son to play tennis, and he quickly outstrips my abilities. Badminton is more my speed, so we start playing that every day. I buy glow-in-the-dark shuttlecocks so we can keep playing even after dark.



THERE’S STILL a major enemy to my inner peace, and it’s located in my pocket. I tend to feel I must reply the second an email comes into my phone. It’s as if I’m playing a full-time game of Whac-A-Mole, with no prizes. It’s draining. I can be perfectly happy, and then I see a few stress-inducing work requests, or friends fighting on Facebook, or some scary news on Twitter or CNN, and I’m plunged straight into a bad mood.

Back in the ‘70s, phones hung sensibly on the wall. You could take them off the hook if you didn’t want to be disturbed. I can’t remember the last time I turned my phone all the way off during the day.

Matheson says we should attempt to liberate ourselves from our phones. “Always turn your phone to ‘do not disturb’ or ‘silent,’ if you can,” she says. “If your kids are at school and you have to be available, then maybe don’t do that. But if your kids are with you, perhaps try turning your phone off for a couple of hours.”

She also recommends limiting apps: “You don’t have to delete your Facebook account; just delete the app from your devices. Try it for a week. While you’re at it, take off whatever other apps you’re addicted to: Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat.”

Ditto cable news. “When I think of the ‘70s, I think of the discontent in terms of our government,” says Matheson. “These are divisive times, too, but back then

we didn’t have to think about it 24/7. Cable news fills our heads with nonstop negativity.” Cable services usually come with parental controls that let you temporarily block certain channels, like CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News. I find that reading the news once in the morning and once in the evening doesn’t make me any less well-informed.

I also start to leave my phone in one place when I’m home, with notifications off. I twitch for the first few days. Then, one afternoon, I walk several blocks and realize I’ve forgotten my phone at home, something that hasn’t happened in years. I feel free, like I did when I headed out with my cousin to spend the day no one knew where. I stay with my son for a couple of hours at the park without my phone. The world doesn’t end.



I HAVE ONE FINAL ‘70s-inspired project: to wear more wrappy, stretchy, washable clothes. I’ve always liked dressing up, but lately it’s gotten to the point where I don’t feel professional without heels and full makeup, and shaped eyebrows, and shaved legs. Feminist activist and writer Carol Hanisch says, “How much better women have it now is debatable. Certainly, there are more women in professional jobs, but on the other hand, we weren’t pressured in the ‘70s to shave our genital area and wear spike heels.” As sexy and dressy as women got in that era, there was an ease and comfort: flowy wrap dresses, clunky shoes, terry cloth, wash-and-wear double-knit polyester.

Not all the ‘70s styles are for me. My hairdresser gave me bangs and a middle part and fluffed it up, and, eh, I certainly would never be mistaken for Cheryl Tiegs. But Dansko clogs or Famolare shoes with the wavy soles? And party dresses that you can throw in the washing machine? And jean skirts? All yes.

I find some things that fit the bill at the back of my closet and more at Zara, H&M, and secondhand stores. It’s awfully relaxing, walking around on platforms instead of spike heels, wearing a wrap dress so going up or down a few pounds isn’t a big deal, and wearing nothing that requires the services of a dry cleaner.

Time I once spent on food prep, clothing care, and instantly responding to email is now mine again. And I find I want to use it on badminton and family movie night. There’s Cheetos dust in the air. Summer feels like summer again. ■

ADA CALHOUN IS THE AUTHOR OF THE NEW MEMOIR *WEDDING TOASTS I’LL NEVER GIVE*.