

# The Things That Break

written by Holly

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Do you remember the Twilight Mom Yodel? I do. It was when the neighborhood moms realized they could see fireflies outside the windows, and their heads popped out the back doors all up and down the street, and in voices that echoed into the hills and back, they shouted in more or less unison, “Baaaaaarbara!” and “Liiiiiiiiiiiissa!” and “Jooooooooohn!” and “Tiiiiimothy!”, followed by “Time to come hoooooooooome!”

Do you remember the significance of the noon whistle? I do. It was when the local plant (in our case, Alcoa) shut down for an hour so the guys could go home and sit down to lunch with their wives and kids. Banks closed at the noon whistle, and so did some stores, and the kids who were playing in the back yards together went rocketing back to their own homes because it was time for chicken noodle soup and peanut butter sandwiches and an opportunity to listen to your parents talking about their lives.

You can take this as Charles Dickens’ “best of times, worst of times” – we were already deeply embedded in Vietnam; a majority of the population believed what the government was telling everyone; we had J. Edgar Hoover in the FBI and Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House and the Cold War in full swing and McCarthyism echoing in the voice of Barry Goldwater; the odds of a woman who didn’t want to be a homemaker getting a good job were only slightly better than the odds of the chicken she was roasting standing up and whistling “Dixie”; and many women still went to college to get their MRS degree and then vanished thereafter into the land of Mrs. John Doe-dom, never to write their own last names, or even first names, again.

Girls knelt in the school corridors while teachers measured the distance from their hemlines to the floor, boys were sent home if the hair on the back of their necks touched their collars, and racism (as deeply entrenched as sexism) was still so pervasive in some places that people not only hadn't really thought of it, but they hadn't really heard of it.

There was much about those years that was bad, corrupt, cruel, much that was truly wrong, much that needed fixing.

But kids weren't walking into high schools and shooting teachers and classmates, either. They were not, for the most part, being raised by strangers. Community schools chose their own books and their own curriculums and graduated students who could read and write, add and subtract, and who knew at least the high points of their own nation's history. Those same kids weren't going home with a key around their necks to let themselves in, fix themselves a snack, lock the door tight behind them and not answer for anybody because they were the only ones there. There WERE neighborhoods, and neighbors, and if your mom had to go out for a minute the woman next door was home and you knew to go over there because you **knew** the woman next door, and her husband, and their kids.

Neighborhoods are gone, and the Twilight Mom Yodel is gone, and Lunch At Noon is gone. And those were good things. Real, solid things.

And I don't think we can bring them back. Not even for those who want them, not even for most of the women and men who realize that raising children to be decent human beings is the most important thing any human being can do. The world changed, and it did so by sacrificing families and the needs of kids on the alter of personal freedom and self-actualization for adults. It sacrificed men and the jobs men did to take care of their families, and the honor men got for providing for their families, in favor of "we're all the same." It sacrificed women who cherished staying home with

their children and raising families. Women's liberation was supposed to be about the right to equal work for equal pay. The right to pursue careers. But not the obligation to, at the expense of the lives of our kids. Staying home to raise and teach their children is no longer an option for most women, and that's wrong. The brave new world sacrificed jobs that pay enough to allow one person to provide for a family and replaced them with jobs that nearly all families in the middle and lower classes must have two of simply to survive.

And no matter what the government sociologists say about day-care being good enough, about more hours being spent in school and before-school programs and after-school programs not being harmful, kids aren't as capable as they were, they know less, they are as a whole more prone to violence and drug use and sexual experimentation at earlier ages and suicide and self-destruction all along the line. Kids raised by institutions don't have the experience of watching parents be good parents, either – and the institutions will always be there to raise their kids, raising the likelihood that children who were institutionalized from an early age will institutionalize their own children.

There are things about the world that are better today than they were in 1966, but what we as a nation and as a civilization do with our children is not one of those things.

The possibility that T.S. Eliot might have been right is never too far from my mind. He said:

This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.

I heard that whimper when my tiny daughter turned when I left her in day care and raised her arms to me and begged me not to leave her – when I listened to experts who insisted that she

would do just as well with strangers as with me. I lost her for years, and got her back at last when she homeschooled high school. But nothing, nothing, could replace the years we lost, and now she is grown, out on her own, and I resent every day the state stole from me, and every hour I stole from myself, and I resent the liars who say, "Go take care of yourself first; as long as you're happy your kids will be fine." I resent being stupid enough or gullible enough to believe that. I have another chance with my youngest. I don't intend to waste it.

We've broken something that I don't think we can fix. We've broken it so badly that most people can't even look at the pieces lying on the ground and guess what those pieces used to be, or how they once fit together. I can't see the consequences far down the road, and neither can anyone else. But I can see the results so far, and the results so far are bad.

Families and neighborhoods should not have been the things we let break and left lying on the ground. They were the best things we had.

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