Things are a mess. Johnny can’t read. Johnny wears his baseball cap backwards. Johnny has a sawed-off shotgun in his gym bag. Jane can’t read either, and in her gym bag there’s a diaphragm. What’s a worried parent to do? Easy. Shackles Johnny and Jane to their beds and instill family values in them. Read them a folk tale from a simpler age when families stuck together and respected each other. Because if they didn’t: a) there’d be no harvest and they’d starve, and b) the nobles who owned them and the land they lived on would beat them to a bloody pulp.

Folk tales should give Johnny pause the next time he feels like breaking into the Defense Department’s classified files. Folk tales’ll give Jane second thoughts as she contemplates going all the way with a Vietnamese-Samoan hunk called Rodriguez in the back of a 1977 Trans Am. Yes siree Bob. Traditional values are what Jane and Johnny need.

The traditional American virtues being touted in the 1990s are overwhelmingly those of nineteenth-century England, exemplified by the prose and poetry that Victorians deemed improving. As our social conditions more closely parallel those of the 1890s – a vast disparity between rich and poor, Dickensian conditions in the slums, tidal waves of immigration, crises in public health, resurgent racial conflict, bulging prisons, rapid growth of mysterious new technologies, trouble in the Balkans, etc. – neo-Victorianism makes sense. Trouble is, the Victorian virtues we look back on so wistfully weren’t the rock-solid values of a happy and stable society; on the contrary, they were a desperate attempt to impose some order on the social chaos wrought by the Industrial Revolution. To counter it, Victorians looked back to earlier, simpler times for inspiration, in particular to the Middle Ages – which is why Victorian fairy stories and children’s books were medieval in style and illustration. For their part, the medievals, beset by the social upheaval of mercantilism and under constant threat from the world of Islam, looked back to the early church for spiritual purity and to Rome for civic virtues. The Roman Empire, in turmoil throughout its history, looked back to earlier times for calmer certainties. As did the Greeks. The late Egyptians looked back fondly on the Middle Egyptians in whose eyes the early Egyptians found favor. The Babylonians doubtless thought the Sumerians had been simpler, more decent folk than themselves. And so on.

The urge to invoke the past for values and virtues echoes back down the millennia to the very dawn of civilization around 8000 B.C., when hunter-gatherers first organized themselves into grain-growing communities. It would be reassuring to think that they came together to establish embryonic family values and civic virtues. No such luck. According to prominent anthropologists like Solomon Katz and Mary Voigt, they did so to ferment the grain and ensure themselves a steady supply of beer. Humanity’s first (and possibly finest) impulse, far from instilling discipline, responsibility, honesty, obedience, and other moral virtues into Johnny and Jane, seems to have been

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1“Tony Hendra is a writer, actor, smoker and drinker who lives with his family in New York” (from the inside back cover of the book). Born in England, Hendra has authored a number of fiction and non-fiction books (especially Going Too Far), has appeared in such films as This Is Spinal Tap and is a former editor of The National Lampoon and Spy magazines. The present selection is most of the “Introduction.”
to leave them to their own devices and get drunk. (There is, of course, the alternative explanation that moral virtues were invented to keep Johnny and Jane busy while humanity popped down to the brewing shed to see how the latest batch was coming.)

If there never was an Eden of family values and civic virtue, what lies behind the conservative desire to reach back to it? Probably that they confuse a historic earlier, simpler time with their own personal earlier, simpler time – to wit, that brief Eden of certitude between the ages of four and seven, when consciousness has emerged, every experience is for the first time, and parents are still large and loved. Pat Buchanan, for example, doesn’t want to remake America so much as return to the America of Westbrook Pegler and the Brooklyn Dodgers, when drugs came from the drugstore and Mass was in Latin. In short, when he was six – and safe. Pat (not to mention Rush and the other Pat) must warm to the works of that splendidly Victorian sentimentalist A.A. Milne:

When I was three, I was hardly me
When I was four, I was not much more
When I was five, I was just alive
But now I’m six, I’m clever as clever
I think I’ll be six now for ever and ever.

This isn’t to let liberals off the hook. If your conservative is an eternal six-year-old, your liberal is an eternal sixteen-year-old, forever oblivious to the nasty realities of life, forever looking forward to some impossible revolution in human nature. It’s when either of these dolts gets to run public policy that they become truly ridiculous. What’s even more absurd than a loudmouthed sexagenarian six-year-old? A deeply concerned sexagenarian teenager. It’s time for everyone to get in touch with his or her inner grown-up.

Of course, every age needs its official virtues, millennial Americans no less than medieval clerics or Ming Dynasty mandarins. Only a moron would imagine, however, that because people once put these codes of conduct in writing they lived up to them. Ought is one thing, Is is another. The two are not supposed to mix. People who insist on living official virtues to the letter usually cause, or get into, huge amounts of trouble. Look at Jesus. Look at Jimmy Carter. Hypocrisy is what keeps society humming. Public pieties are to be intoned at the appropriate moments, such as elections or executions; the rest of the time people get on with the business of skimming, boasting, goofing off, ducking responsibility, lusting, eating, beating the odds, and popping down to the brewing shed to see how the latest batch is coming.

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2 Author of American and Fireside Chats and other nostalgic looks at “Americana.”
3 Author of Winnie the Pooh and other nostalgic childhood reminiscences.