Boy the way Glenn Miller Played
Songs that made the Hit Parade
Guys like us we had it made
Those were the days.

And you knew who you were then
Girls were girls and men were men
Mister, we could use a man like Herbert
Hoover again

Didn’t need no Welfare states
Everybody pulled his weight
Gee our old LaSalle ran great
Those were the days

These haunting lyrics, expressing profound longing for a simpler, if only imaginary, time, were the opening theme of the iconic television series, *All in the Family*, which ran on CBS from 1971 to 1979, and was the number one TV show five years in a row. When it’s original pilot was produced by ABC in 1968 the show was called, *Justice for All*, about Archie and Edith Justice, a conservative, self-righteous bigot and his timid, devoted, not so savvy spouse, living with their adult daughter and her argumentative, liberal, socialist, atheist, hippie husband. After ABC rejected the show, fearing its enormous potential for controversy, CBS picked it up, counting on its big city context appealing to a demographic that its other programs, like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *Petticoat Junction*, and *Mayberry RFD* left out.

“Bunker” turned out to be a more fitting name than Justice, especially for Archie who hides inside the bunker of bigotry and intolerance in response to an increasingly changing and unfamiliar world. And, to remain safe, and comfortable, and ignorant inside his fortress of solitude, he has to debunk almost everything and everyone else around him, because there’s not enough room to let anyone else in, not even those few he does care about. Although the show remains poignant, it’s unlikely the racist language he often expressed towards Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, or any other ethnic group, along with his offensive, sexist attitudes toward women and his homophobic reactions to anyone he suspects isn’t straight, would likely be considered too politically incorrect to broadcast today.

Even in its own day the show received a lot of flack for making light of bigotry and intolerance, but it wasn’t really a comedy about these things, it was a tragedy about them. It wasn’t about getting a laugh at the expense of others, but about laughing at the irony and futility of hate and prejudice. Week after week, episode after episode,
Archie Bunker is confronted with the limitations of his biased worldview by having to deal with real people living outside the bunker of his own mind. In one episode, for example, he’s stuck in an elevator with a successful African American businessman, a single woman, and a Latino couple who are expecting a baby. Archie spends most the time shouting and using sexist and racial stereotypes. But when the pregnant woman goes into labor, he does everything he can to avoid caring or getting involved, to the point that he refuses to even look in her direction. But at the moment of birth he can’t help but glance down, gazing in awe and wonder, as the audience witnesses the child’s birth solely through the softening expressions on his face. “You got a little boy,” he says. As the shows creator, Norman Lear says, “The audience cheered. Some cried. Everyone agreed it was our best work to date and simply had to win an Emmy. It did.”

This episode serves as a metaphor of what *All in the Family* is about, that the world is a small place and we’re all in it together; people of all backgrounds, and genders, and ethnicities, are part of the human family. No matter how hard he tries, Archie is continually confronted with this truth. “He was afraid of tomorrow,” Lear says, “He was afraid of anything new... He was lamenting the passing of time, because it’s always easier to stay with what's familiar and not move forward. This wasn’t a terrible human being. This was a fearful human being. He wasn’t evil, he wasn’t a hater—he was just afraid of change.”

Even so, as Lear says in his new memoir, “some accused us of reinforcing racism through Archie’s attitudes, others gave us credit for exposing the absurdity of prejudice.” Probably both are true, but to understand the intention of the show, it’s helpful to understand a little something about Norman Lear himself. For no one is more deserving of the title, “Hollywood Liberal,” than him. Lear, who went on to bring us television’s first African American families in shows like *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons*, and shows about strong independent women like, *One Day at a Time*, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, and, *Maude*, admittedly used his work to showcase racist and sexist stereotypes, while at once exposing their tremendous flaws.

Throughout his life he has been a huge advocate for liberal causes. He is the founder, for instance, of *People For the American Way*, emerging in opposition to political activities of the *Moral Majority* and the *Christian Broadcasting Network* in the 1980s. Fundamentalist preacher, Jerry Falwell once sent a letter out to members of the Moral Majority, claiming that Lear was bringing, “filth and sexual perversion into our living rooms,” making him, “the greatest threat to the American family in a generation.” Teleevangelist, Pat Robertson, wrote a letter telling Lear he’d been a Golden Gloves Boxer, doesn’t like to fight, but seldom loses when he does. “I want to

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2 Ibid., loc. 3654
3 Ibid., loc. 3638
4 Ibid., loc. 4987
warn you with all solemnity,” the letter said, “Your arms are too short to box with God.”

And another Fundamentalist fundraising letter said, “Norman Lear’s new organization will send busloads of Big Labor Bosses in Soviet tanks into your community, along with homosexual teachers who are trying to stop your children from praying.”

He also owns one of the few original copies of the Declaration of Independence, which he tours around the nation to help educate people about its truly liberal contents and values, as well as founding BornAgainAmerican.org, devoted to promoting those values as the true American way. Today, at age 92, he still advocates for secularism, supports democrats, and is a contributor to the left leaning online news blog, The Huffington Post. So he may have helped create a bigoted character many found unduly offensive, but Norman Lear is nothing like Archie Bunker, and his heart, from my perspective, has always been in the right place. And if some of the stereotypes he brought to light in his sitcoms are politically incorrect by today’s standards, we ought to appreciate that they are standards he helped create.

It’s understandable that in 1971, during the Vietnam War and on the heels of the Civil Rights movement, that a progressive show dealing with racism and the generation gap would emerge. But the show was also far ahead of its time when it came to confronting the issue of homosexuality. In one episode, for example, Archie ridicules one of his son-in-law’s friends because he seems overly effeminate, only to find out later that one of his own idols, a handsome, manly, conservative, former all-American football player who Archie drinks beer, arm wrestles, and watches boxing with at the neighborhood bar, is gay. Archie refuses to believe it, and accuses Steve of making a bad joke. “Have it your way Arch. The Truth’s in the eye of the beholder anyway. I’ll see you later pal,” Steve says before punching Archie in the arm. This episode, which first aired in February of 1971, was entitled Judging Books by Covers, and featured the first gay character in sitcom history.

That’s pretty amazing considering the gay rights movement didn’t officially begin until June of 1969, just three years earlier, in response to a violent police raid at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. ABC rejected the series in 1968, partly, because network executives were worried about this first season script portraying a gay man in a positive light. After CBS picked it up, they sent Lear a memo asking, “that homosexual terminology be kept to an absolute minimum,” and that terms like, “‘pansy,’ ‘sissy,’ or even ‘fairy,’” be used instead of “fag” or “queer.” Even the President of the United States, Richard Nixon was concerned about the show’s positive treatment of gays. According to the secretly recorded White House tapes, Nixon complained to his staff that, “CBS came on with a movie, one that they made

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., loc. 3539
themselves and... they were glorifying homosexuality... I think the son-in-law obviously, apparently goes both ways, likes the daughter and all the rest.”

Good thing Nixon was out of office in 1975 when an episode entitled, *Archie the Hero* first aired. Archie comes home bragging about having saved the life of a passenger who collapsed in the back of his cab by giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He encourages his family to notify the paper so they can write a story about him. A little while later the woman comes by the house to thank him in person. Archie is extremely pleased until he finds out Ms. Beverly LaSalle is actually a transvestite and professional female impersonator. LaSalle was played by an actor named, Lori Shannon, who actually was an openly gay female impersonator. You can imagine Archie’s befuddled face when LaSalle removes her wig, and a bit later when a reporter does show up wanting to make the story public.

LaSalle’s character was so popular that she was brought back for two additional episodes. A year later, in *Beverly Rides Again*, she returns to take Archie and Edith out to dinner to celebrate the anniversary of their kiss. Archie reluctantly agrees, but only if she’s willing to make it a double date to help him get back at one of his friends who keeps making Archie the butt of his practical jokes. Then, a year later, in a touching two-part episode, she returns again to take Archie and Edith to watch her perform at Carnegie Hall.

Edith insists she also join them for Christmas dinner the next day, and they tell each other they feel like sisters. After her performance, when she’s no longer in drag, son-in-law Michael walks Beverly to a corner where she can catch a cab. Along the way they are attacked and beaten by a gang of men who take them for a gay couple. Michael survives, but beautiful Beverly’s injuries prove fatal and she’s never seen again. Edith is so distraught that she becomes depressed and loses her faith. Lear says, “Nothing caused our live audience to ‘shout’ their empathy more loudly than Edith’s reaction to the news that a transvestite who’d become her friend was murdered by a street gang simply for being a man in women’s clothes. Grief stricken and unable to see how a just God could allow that, her faith was threatened. The audience was in tears.”

The next morning Archie dresses like Santa and tries to cheer her up by asking what she wants for Christmas. Edith tearfully says, “I want Beverly to be alive. I mean I don’t understand it. Everything was going so good for him and somebody had to kill him.” Gloria tries to console her mother by adding, “Yeah, just because he was different.” Edith then pretends to leave for church but just goes out to sit on the front porch. Archie then tells Gloria, “You know I wished I had told Beverly what a nice fella she was... But you don’t know how to talk to ‘em, you don’t know what to say dere, so you don’t say nuttin... But what you said before, he was different, ya see that’s the lesson to learn dere, everybody should try hard... to be the same as

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8 Ibid., loc. 3631
9 Ibid., loc. 3802
everybody else... cause that way life is a lot easier for those people and also a lot easier for us normal people.” So, even in his grief, even in admitting his affection for Beverly, Archie couldn’t let go of his fear and ignorance. He couldn’t help but blame the victim. If only she had tried harder to be just like everyone else.

_All in the Family_ gave us a lot of firsts. It was the first sitcom to remain top rated five seasons in a row, the first filmed before a live studio audience, and the first to televise the sound of a toilet flush. In addition to also being the first to feature openly gay characters, including a transgender woman, and to take on gay bashing, it was also first to take on issues like women’s liberation, rape, religion, breast cancer, miscarriage, abortion, menopause and impotence. In the midst of it all, the show remained highly rated and its characters well loved. In 1978 President Carter invited its cast and crew to the White House where he and Rosalynn talked about their favorite episodes, especially “the one,” they said, “where Edith lost and regained her faith.”\(^\text{10}\) The United States Postal Service has since honored the show with an _All in the Family_ stamp, and, today, Archie and Edith’s chairs are on display at the Smithsonian.

Yet here we are, nearly 45 years after the show first aired, and, in many ways, it feels like the Archie Bunkers of the world have taken over. There’s an entire news network that’s like watching a reality TV version of _All in the Family_. I’m talking about Fox News, of course, which exploits the same bigotry, fear, and ignorance epitomized by Archie Bunker, in order to promote an ultra-conservative agenda. There’s still too much racism which, in many ways, has worsened since the 1970s, especially when it comes to the escalating incarceration rate in a criminal justice system that disproportionately targets people of color, along with inequity in housing, employment, and education. When it comes to wages, promotions, and reproductive freedom, women are still treated as second-class citizens. And, despite recent advances in marriage equality and gay rights, there’s still way too much hatred and discrimination against the GBLTQ members of our community. Alas, as Lear himself says, “If two thousand years of the Judeo-Christian ethic hadn’t eradicated bigotry and intolerance, I didn’t think a half-hour sitcom was going to do it.”\(^\text{11}\)

But, perhaps today, also more than ever, the message of _All in the Family_, that everyone must be included in the human family, is finally sinking in. Perhaps, as a society, and an increasingly global society at that, we’re finally ready to become more inclusive, and the great advances we’re seeing in the area of marriage equality in our nation and around the world is only the beginning. As mass communication technology forces us to connect with each other more quickly and more broadly than ever before, as we are increasingly faced with the reality that all people share one economy, one atmosphere, one community, and one planet, as well as face the

\(^{10}\) Ibid., loc. 3802  
\(^{11}\) Ibid., loc. 3647
same problems and share the same dreams, we are finding that we are all stuck on
the same elevator together.

Between 2004 and 2011, only 5 states had legalized gay marriage. Today there are
37. And just last month, Ireland became the 18th nation in the world to make same-
sex marriage legal. Meanwhile, back here in the U.S., one of our real life manly idols,
Olympic Gold Medalist, formally known as Bruce Jenner, reintroduced herself to the
world as Caitlyn Jenner, now the most famous transgender woman in the world.

As a result of all this change, many in our nation are experiencing an Archie Bunker
moment in which they are desperately clinging to their bigotry and intolerance, only
to find it backfiring in unprecedented ways. Earlier this year, for example, Indiana
Governor Mike Pence signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act into law, which
would effectively allow businesses to use religion as an excuse to discriminate
against GBLTQ folks. Thousands protested in the streets and major corporations,
organizations, and other States throughout the nation threatened to stop conducting
business in Indiana if anti-discrimination protections weren’t quickly restored.
Within days there were.

Norman Lear says he often got letters from fans who actually agreed with Archie
Bunker’s bigoted views asking, “Why do you always make Archie look like such a
horse’s ass at the end of the show?”12 This is precisely what’s happening to those
who are still clinging to old views that got them elected to office just a few years ago,
but now make them the butt of a very bad joke. This past week, a lawyer arguing
against New Jersey’s ban on gay conversion therapy actually claimed that Satan is
behind the Gay Rights Movement. If it weren’t true life, we’d all have to laugh at a
fellow who so unwittingly makes himself the brunt of his own joke. Presidential
hopeful, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker also said this week that he wants a
Constitutional Amendment barring the Supreme Court from legalizing same-sex
marriage. Again, this position may have got him elected just a few years ago, but
today it just ends up making him look like a bigot who is out of touch with the times.

45 years ago a New York Times editorial commended All in the Family for being a
metaphor for what it called a “peaceful revolution.”13 Today we are finally beginning
to see the fruit of that revolution, as marriage equality becomes increasingly legal
round the world, and as fewer and fewer of us are willing to tolerate discrimination
against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people in our nation. And, for the
first time in U.S. history, income inequality has become our top concern, as has the
institutional racism that continues to oppress people of color in our society.
Meanwhile, the Archie Bunkers of the world are so clueless they don’t even realize
the peaceful revolution has happened. They continue espousing and defending old
biases and bigotries, while the rest of us have finally learned to open our hearts and
minds and homes to truly include All in the Family.

12 Ibid., loc. 3655
13 Ibid., loc. 3670