

We Are Always In It

It's tempting to believe we're living through the worst of times.

The headlines feel unprecedented. The divisions feel sharper than they've ever been. The pace feels faster, the stakes higher, the ground less stable than it used to be.

Every generation that has ever lived through upheaval has felt exactly this way.

That isn't a reason to dismiss what we're feeling. It's a reason to add some perspective to it.

The Same Old Pattern, Read From the Inside

History doesn't move in a straight line. It swings — a pendulum arcing between periods that favor capital, investment, and growth, and periods that favor labor, distribution, and security. Each swing is a hinge point: the moment the arc changes direction, usually felt by the people living through it as chaos rather than as a turn.

Neither swing gets it wrong. Each one addresses real problems the previous arrangement couldn't handle — a compromised fix, built with the tools and sensibilities of its moment, not a permanent settlement. And the world doesn't hold still to let a fix stay a fix. New technology, new generations, new circumstances keep arriving, and sooner or later the tools built for yesterday's problems are being asked to handle problems nobody designed them for. That's not the swing failing. That's just what happens when solutions have to keep living in a world that keeps changing.

You can watch the pattern across the last century.

The Crash of 1929 exposed what an unregulated, investor-first system could do when it broke. The New Deal that followed built new guardrails — regulation, labor protections, a stronger social safety net — favoring stability and distribution over raw growth.

Decades later, that arrangement developed its own tensions. By the 1970s, stagflation — slow growth and high inflation together — made the New Deal-era tools look like they'd stopped working. Reaganomics answered with a swing back toward investment, deregulation, and growth.

That swing solved real problems too. And it also produced its own pressures, building for decades — some from the policy itself, some from forces that had nothing to do with policy at all: technology reshaping entire industries, globalization changing who competes with whom, generational experiences shaping different expectations about work, security, and fairness.

Today, many people sense we're deep into another one of those pressure points — an economy where wealth has concentrated at the top in ways that feel, to a lot of people, unsustainable.

That sensation isn't new. It's the oldest sensation in the pattern.

We Are Always Living Through the Hinge

Here's the part that's easy to forget: every one of those turning points felt like chaos to the people living inside it.

The people who lived through 1929 didn't know a New Deal was coming, or that it would work, or for how long. The people navigating stagflation in the 1970s didn't know what would replace it, or whether the replacement would be an improvement. Nobody living through any of these moments got to read the chapter summary in advance. They only got the uncertainty.

We remember these periods now as tidy chapters with names and dates, because we're reading about them after the fact. But nobody experienced them that way. They experienced them the way we're experiencing this one — without knowing which direction things turn next, or how long the discomfort lasts, or what the new arrangement will look like once it arrives.

We are not living after the pattern. We are always living inside it.

There's a third option, besides pushing the pendulum or bracing against it: stepping out of it entirely. Deciding it's all broken, that nothing will fix it, and that the fixing is someone else's job. That posture feels like clarity, but it isn't neutral — it's a vote for whatever direction things are already drifting. Every voice that steps back is one fewer perspective in the room where the direction actually gets decided. And it doesn't spread evenly: the people who check out aren't a random slice of everyone, they're often the ones least sure their voice would change anything — which means the ones who stay aren't a full picture of what the country actually thinks, wants, or needs. A mission built by fewer and fewer voices stops being able to claim it speaks for the whole. And the less we engage, the easier it becomes to keep complaining from the sidelines, because spectating asks nothing of us but noticing.

So What Do We Do With That?

Knowing we're in a hinge point doesn't tell us which way to push it. It doesn't settle any of the real arguments about policy, priorities, or values — those are still ours to have, and they still matter.

What it offers is something smaller, and maybe more useful: permission to stop treating the discomfort itself as proof that something has gone uniquely, irreparably wrong.

The pendulum swinging doesn't mean the clock is broken. It means it's a clock.

What we do with that time — what tensions we notice, what we choose to build in response, who we trust to hold the tools while we build it — is still up to us.

That's not a small thing. It might be the only thing.