

Many Are Called, But Few Are Frozen

In my office, high on a top shelf, above volumes on metaphysics and ancient wisdom, sits my Acme Cryo-Kit. It displays its name in day-glo letters, like a neon cross on top a downtown mission. It's evangelical that way. Up front about what it is and funny as Hell. Just like Bill.

Bill, the Department Jokester, presented this homemade inaugural keepsake to me at my first Social Science meeting to many guffaws and applause.

"During the hiring process, some of us discovered that *wonderful* website of yours," he crooned in the dulcet tones of a beauty contest MC, "so I just *knew* you would appreciate this gift."

That *wonderful* website, I later discovered, had nearly derailed my candidacy. It was an old Yahoo! Geocities job, which I had lovingly hand-coded in .html. This was back in 2001 before everybody and their brother had a blog or a Facebook page. I had considered taking it down, thinking that if one of the committee members were to search for me on the internet, he might come across my site and perhaps some of the political content might bias him in some minor way which *could* make a difference *if* things were close. But I kept telling myself, "It'll be *fine*."

Three of the links on my site had to do with a cryonics, the science of freezing the dead for future reanimation. I had links to the Usenet archive of sci.cryonics, The Cryonics Institute, and its competitor ALCOR, the largest and best known outfit, "Home of \$120,000 Corpsicle!" as I'd sometimes joke.

In my youth, I was under the spell of religion. Despite not hearing a word about God or the afterlife from my parents, I remember looking at the "climber" in our backyard, a dome-like lattice of painted steel bars, and thinking about hanging myself so I could see what Heaven was like. After being invited to a Church youth group in 7th grade, I become a regular, finally "accepting Christ" at a Winter Retreat. I was quite serious about my faith. I studied the Bible, read the great apologists and theologians, was active in Campus Life and Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, learned Greek and Hebrew and, as a college junior, was evaluating half a dozen theological seminaries at which I planned on continuing my studies. I ended up going to graduate school in Philosophy, during which time I confronted my intellectual doubts, eventually abandoning Christianity for Deism. Further work in Philosophy pushed me far into the agnostic camp. The term *atheist* still seems too full of certainty where certainty can't be had – too *religious*. Atheism is all about firm and unequivocal *denial*: *There is no God!* Now I suppose you could say that if atheism is a religion, then *not* collecting stamps is a hobby, but to me *atheism* still smacks of the proselytizer. I don't claim to know that there *isn't* a God, but in the absence of any convincing argument or evidence, I find the proposition extremely unlikely, and the burden of proof is on the person making the positive claim that there *is* a God. So don't call me an atheist, just call me Godless.

So, as a former person of faith with a naturalistic worldview, I regard cryonics as my last, best hope for immortality. The science of cryonics is solid, though not certain. I think about it like this: Imagine you have terminal cancer. It has withstood all traditional treatment methods, but there is a new experimental drug being tested. Your doctor tells you that there is no guarantee it will work. In fact, your chance may be less than 50/50. The animal trials have had some success but humans are different. It's expensive, but your insurance will pay for most of it. If you're going to be rational, you'll sign up, take your chances and hope to God you're not in the control group.

Cryonics can be conceived of as a grand experiment, the results of which won't know for centuries. The question you have to ask yourself is, "Do I want to be in the control group or the experimental group?" In actual clinical trials, of course, you don't get to choose. You don't even know. Everyone thinks he's getting the real treatment, but half the subjects (those in the control group), get a placebo – usually a sugar pill. The other half (the experimental group) get the real thing, which might or might not work. Success is measured by comparing the experimental with the control group.

In the experiment that is cryonics, if choose to be in the control group, you will rot away in a pine box or be burned to ashes in a crematorium. Your faith, like a sugar pill delivered by a man in a white lab coat to a terminal cancer patient, will provide a sweet but empty hope. But if you're in the experimental group, you will be quickly cooled and medivaced to a cryonics facility, where your blood will be replaced with a substance which limits freezing damage and you will be slowly brought down to the temperature of liquid nitrogen. There you can wait for centuries, if need be, for the technology to successfully revive you and keep you alive indefinitely. The exponential curve of technological advance suggests that practical immortality, including cures for cancer, cloned organs, cybernetic implants and treatments for aging, will come sooner than people expect, but probably not in our lifetime. Cryonics is a stop-gap measure. In our mystical culture, it's seen as a bizarre curiosity, while believing in a ghostly mini-me which floats up to Heaven (or descends to the bowels of the earth to face eternal torment) is seen as perfectly reasonable and normal. I'd rather place my confidence in science than in old books from superstitious eras or the subjective experiences of those who claim to here from God, saints, angels or the spirits of the departed.

But even atheists, agnostics and skeptics about the immortality of the soul tend to be naysayers when it comes to cryonics. To them it amounts to a hubristic fantasy. No one cheats death. Besides, who are *you* that you think you should live forever? When it comes your turn, and you've had your "fair share" of years, be a good citizen and die. Everybody does it. Cryonicists, they say, must have big egos. I say these critics lack self-esteem and carry an irrational death-wish. When life and death are placed before him, *ceteris paribus*, the rational person will choose life.

That's the speech I would have liked to have given before the department, as Bill presented my "award." It probably would have gone over like an altar call at a meeting of the American Atheists' Association. So, I just stood there, like a victim of Candid Camera after the gag has been revealed, hoping the audience was laughing *with* me, not *at* me.

Bill went over the features with the showmanship of a late night TV huckster selling \$200 blenders, removing the lid of the 12 x 18 ice chest to reveal the contents.

"Inside we have ice trays. You fill these with ordinary water – distilled or tap. Let the trays sit in the freezer over night. Next, you put the ice into the included freezer bags, using the patented zip-lock seal. You can also use these bags for any other body parts you may wish to preserve along with your head. Then you place everything into the unit, put on the lid and *viola!*"

Unlike the Cryonics Institute, ALCOR sometimes performs a procedure called *neurosuspension* in which they remove the head of the client and freeze only it. Hence, Bill's head-in-a-Styrofoam-bucket gag. By concentrating on the head, ALCOR is able to do a better job of preserving the brain, the seat of consciousness. The client doesn't expect to come back as a head on a plate, like you'd see in a B-movie. Rather, the thinking is that any technology sufficient to revive whole body clients will be able to regrow a body from the client's DNA.

I thought it was odd that no one seemed to notice the links to my site expressed mutually exclusive beliefs. For example, I had a link to a "Stand to Reason," an evangelical Christian apologetics site. Cryonics is motivated by materialist assumptions. Christianity is predicated on a belief in the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. It reminded me of *Socrates v. Athens*, where Meletus, the chief prosecutor, charges Socrates with being both a heretic *and* an atheist. A heretic, Socrates points out, believes in gods, just not the State-approved ones. An atheist believes in no gods at all. So, argues Socrates, since there's no possible way I could be both a heretic *and* an atheist, the prosecution must simply be making up baseless accusations against me.

But unlike Jesus or Socrates, I had triumphed over my enemies. *I had gotten the job!* I graciously took the good-natured ribbing from Bill for what it was. To me this gift said that, despite what others may regard as quirky beliefs and interests, I was among friends. Later, I found out that this was not exactly true, and that there actually was a shadowy conspiracy to derail my hiring and replace me with an internal candidate, an affable vegetarian named Barry who specialized in care ethics, a conspiracy not yet dead...

"Jeff, that website almost cost you this job!" Susan, one of my new colleagues, later revealed. Someone on the committee, who also happened to also be friends with Barry, had printed out portions of the website and had shown them to the President during the hiring process. The cryonics link might have seemed a little odd, but mixed in with links to sites about UFOs, psychic powers, shadowy conspiracies, near death experiences and

ghosts, it became a useful tool to torpedo my candidacy. Never mind that the context of these was quizzical interest or fodder for critical thinking. Coupled with links to right-wing radio, the site made my candidacy a veritable *Lusitania*, doomed to go down with all hands. I later got second-hand snippets of the hand-wringing meetings.

"Look at this stuff. This guy's a nut! *Rush Limbaugh*? Do we really want one of *those* people in our department?"

"It's just what this guy believes," Susan had said. "There's no evidence it will affect his teaching. I thought his demo was really good. He's taught at two different Community College for the last three or four years, and I think he would be great with our students."

"But is hiring someone like this consistent with our core values, with the mission of the college?"

"Look at the points. Do the points matter or not? He's far and away ahead of all the other candidates."

At the time I wondered what was taking so long. I had chalked it up to a slow-moving bureaucracy, not knowing that my candidacy was weighing in the balance. And, as it turned out, it still was. I'd been employed all of six months when the college gave me notice that they were cutting my position.

"Barry is a snake in the grass!" warned Chip, a friend I later offended by using his belief in Feng Shui as an example of how an otherwise intelligent and highly educated person can have irrational beliefs. I didn't mention his name or even his gender, but it got back to him all the same. He had been another ally on the committee.

"I bet he's behind this. It was a last-minute cut. He's going to bide his time over the next year in the Business Department and apply for the full-time position once they bring it back."

Barry has been a Business Management instructor, but had recently gotten tired of teaching students how to chase filthy lucre and had gotten a Ph.D. in Philosophy at the University of Oregon. He was friendly and personable and seemed to be on good terms with the President. I had even seen the two of them together recently at the Renaissance Room, the swanky Culinary Arts "restaurant" which serves up gourmet food at cafeteria prices. I'd been trying to finish some grading over a plate of pasta, when I got one of my papers too close to the candle and lit it on fire. I shrieked like a little girl, frantically puffing at the paper with pursed lips until it went out. The whole restaurant went silent. I was afraid to look up and meet anyone's eyes. Then slowly, mercifully, the murmuring noise of conversation resumed. I was certain the President and Barry were laughing at my expense. *Don't be paranoid, Jeff.*

I fought for my job. I raised accreditation issues with the Board of Education. I mobilized my students to attend budget meetings. They held signs that said "Save Philosophy!" and "The Unexamined Life is NOT Worth Living!" I worked out facts and figures which showed the college would actually *lose* money by cutting my position. The result was that Philosophy was saved, while Business Management, the Police Reserve Academy and a few other small programs were cut. Barry continued at the college in various capacities, including teaching part-time in Philosophy, until he got a full-time gig at a small private four-year college in the hot, humid, sticky South. I'd applied to a college there, in a moment of desperation when I thought I might never find a job, yet here I remain in rain country, cool as a cucumber, about to receive my ten-year plaque. And when in my dotage I'm selecting things to put into long-term storage – to take with me into a future of flying cars and sexy fembots – I think I'll part with my plaque, but my Acme Cryo-Kit will be with me always, even to the end of the age.