

I Signed Up for This

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: THIS PAPER IS A WORK OF WHAT I’M CALLING FOR NOW, until someone corrects me: speculative fiction with non-fictive elements. The premise, plot, and trajectory of the piece is fictive, imagined, but I use curriculum fragments, sticky memories of curricular events that I have experienced and can’t get out of my head, can’t shake no matter what (Poetter, 2025), as the basis for most of the action and movement in the paper. I don’t think it’s important to parse out what is “real” or not here (it’s all real by the way), which things or items or memories or statements or dialogue or characters are fictive or not. I’ve mixed it all together, with what my good friend and colleague Morna McDermott McNulty—the energy and inspiration behind this special issue—would call a good dose of “fictive alchemy.”

c. 2050

This may sound fantastical to you, but it’s all true, and real. Near the end of my “true earthly life” in 2050 (My TEL, as they say now; I lived to the perfectly round age of 88) my primary care physician, Dr. Sills, asked me to meet her for coffee at DunkBucks (yes, the two entities merged and it’s the best the executives could do!) following my semi-annual appointment. I agreed to the meeting, though I found it odd. We had been in the relationship of doctor/patient for many years, but not necessarily friends. When we met later that morning, she turned my world upside down.

“Tom, I asked you here today to seek your permission to recommend you for a long-term study being conducted by Gilly Labs and quantum physicists in Spain. They have a new ‘medical process’ (she used her fingers to highlight the phrasing ‘medical process’ with air quotes) for what they are calling ‘New Life Alpha,’ or NLA, where they harvest a small sample of your DNA, and mutate it with other particles that mesh with your remains, and through a complicated chemical process convert ‘you’ into a new living organism that is microscopic but that has all of the qualities of a human being in terms of brain function, memory, and communication, just without a traditional body.”

Dr. Sills paused, I perceived, because the words coming out of her mouth sounded purely fantastical, made up, silly, science fiction-y, not possibly true. No doubt some kind of weird, sick joke. But she didn’t blink, staring right into my still bright, still not dull, hazel eyes.

I stared right back at her, fixed, and said, “Wait...” I paused, just to catch my breath, “So, this sounds to me like cryogenics, the wild notion during this entire century and part of the last one

of freezing something to wake it up later. Why would I want to do that? I've lived a good life. I'm at peace with the next step."

"Well, this isn't cryogenics, which has never been perfected, though what the professors are proposing may have an impact on that industry. It's more like the old cloning approach. You don't have to store the DNA by freezing it to wake it up later. You can wake it up now, convert it, mutate it, whatever you want to call it, now. This procedure is quick and enduring."

"How does it really work? Tell me more, in layperson's terms."

"Okay," she paused, too...

"When you are still alive, you provide a DNA sample with just a mouth swab. The scientists perform the procedure with that sample after your bodily life ends. They re-activate the DNA to form a new being, but it's not totally new. It's you, just in a different form, with all of your memories and past experiences intact. The team has a contract with the US government to run this trial with 100 octogenarians with the lifespan of the new being lasting 60 years. They want to know what experienced people from all walks of life think of 'the future...'" She took a deep breath to continue.

"If you died this year, you would live until 2110. 60 more years, no more, no less. Once you sign on, you have a five-year window to pass away naturally without being excluded from the trial. You would then continue with your life during the next 60 years, but you couldn't have contact with family. You would be alive, in theory and in reality, but alone in the world and without a human body. The fact of the matter is, Tom, that your DNA is one of just a few perfect matches for this process in the entire world. What do you think?"

I didn't hesitate another instant, "I'm in."

c. 2110

I'm at the end of my "extended time" now—what the doctors and the medical field and public as we know it today call "Extended Life Span" (ELS). No one I ever knew, except Dr. Sills, knows that I chose this path, and no one from my past can contact me, though most of them are all gone now. And so, this is it, no extensions. My body did die in 2050, right at the end of the year 2050, after my 88th birthday. It was all very peaceful as I recall, with people I loved around me...well, as many as remained, but especially my beautiful, brilliant wife of over 60 years and my own children and their grandchildren.

Most of them came around to say goodbye and I really, really appreciated it. The love and care I felt really buoyed me and allayed all of my fears of taking this next step. I learned over the years that loving and being loved constituted the heart of what I thought was worth living for. They helped teach me that lesson, along with all of those close at hand, and those all the way back to my birth and parents and siblings, over 88 years, and all the way to the end. That was very good.

But as these final days of my extended life end, and while I'm able to think and reflect on what I have seen and done over these 148 years, especially the last 60 of my ELS, I wanted to share some insights with the world as one of the first 100 people to have an ELS. This is what I learned from "the future" about education, curriculum, and life as we know it, and knew it. Of course, the future, in many ways, involves the past.

I can't shake this fragment of memory, even in my last days. It keeps popping up, I don't know why. But when I was in public high school in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we periodically had school-wide assemblies that all students and faculty attended. They usually lasted an hour (or about 1 bell period) and were introduced by the student council president. It was usually entertainment—sometimes a student-led event like holiday skits, or sometimes provided by outsiders like the Air Force Band of Flight or a ventriloquist. I always loved the assemblies. And I felt like they just popped up unexpectedly like a special treat; I never knew when one was coming. We just heard the announcement over the intercom system and walked to the main gym to assemble and watch. My bet was that the educational idea back then was to bring culture and a social spirit to bear on the school experience for maturing young people. Not a bad notion at all, but the quality of the programming certainly could be strained by a low budget.

My senior year I had been elected student council president. So, at the Fall Assembly in 1980, I got to introduce the act, which was a disco roller-skating exhibition. That's right, a disco roller-skating show. Now remember (But how could you? It was 130 years ago!), 1979 had already happened, with the "I hate disco" movement taking shape in Chicago and spreading throughout the nation—culminating in the ugly incident called "Disco Demolition Night" at the Chicago White Sox v. Minnesota Twins baseball doubleheader. On July 12, 1979, the White Sox had to forfeit the second game of the twin bill to the Twins after the detonation of a large crate of disco records during the between-games "ceremony" caused a huge explosion, fire, and a riot on the field that the police could not quell before the field was so damaged that the game was deemed unplayable.

And I must admit looking back that in spite of all of the hate out there, that I didn't hate disco then and still don't. I actually still have some Bee Gees and Donna Summer songs on my digitized sound transponder that I digest periodically. But I couldn't believe that this was going to happen in our high school with all 1,000 students in attendance. In 1980! Disco, in fact, which we all knew back then as a nearly all-encompassing music phenomenon in the broader culture, was mostly dead by 1980.

As I introduced the act, I became very worried about how the students might react. After all, many of my classmates and friends fought in local bars throughout the region on Friday and Saturday nights (18 year-olds in Ohio could drink 3.2% beer legally back then), and had given up on disco long before this morning's assembly, listening mostly to rock, funk, and country music. Not disco, jazz, or classical music, for the most part.

But as the performance unfolded—which was a one-person show, set to disco music, and that the performer tried wholeheartedly to make interesting with audience involvement and the musical choices and movement—I noticed something remarkable: The students, for the most part, except for some hooting and hollering here and there, watched the performance. They took it in, even though overall it was just terrible, horrible, and very hard to watch. The skater didn't have that many different moves, hardly any of them were difficult or tricky, and it was disco. It's still in my mind's eye to this very day: both the spectacle of it, and the deep, rich beauty of it. I can still see it happening right in front of me.

Here children gathered enmasse in a public setting, at the end of their adolescence, with all their differences and judgments and biases and prejudices, and they watched a roller-disco show together for an hour without disrupting it. No crates of records were blown up, no riot ensuing. Now you can call this phenomenon/behavior by my peers a lot of things: overwhelming apathy; a

lack of agency; complicit acquiescence (by the way, most people secretly loved disco music, especially the kind popular in the 1970s), maybe. But I called it an event with rich beauty above already, because the students had learned, and had no doubt had the lesson reinforced at home and in the community, that most people are just trying to do their best, and make a living through some sort of contribution of talent to the world, which on some level, at least at the surface level in public, deserves respect.

And at some level, in addition, I think that these growing adolescents, my peers, who had already experienced some amount of failure at home or at school, publicly or privately, knew what it was like to do something you loved but stunk at, or that people didn't understand or appreciate, or degraded openly and ungraciously in the very same public we tried to occupy amicably every day at school and beyond. And this caused them, I surmise, to develop empathy, and a certain level of passionate understanding. Perhaps it's about learning early on that showing respect for others by giving them some space to fail, some grace, constitutes an important part of growing up, becoming an adult, developing into a newly minted and voting, tax-paying citizen. Part of the curriculum of schooling lost today is the social and personal capital that accrues to human beings when they care for others even when they stink. School-wide assemblies featuring disco roller skaters become places where engaged and spontaneous learning occurs. You can't have that kind experience or learn that lesson if you don't meet in public.

So, this type of learning wasn't possible in the early 2100s. All public schools have been closed. Now the "public," such as it is, has control, person-by-person, to make all educational decisions privately. One choice that has been taken off the table is going to public school and learning about academic subjects, and life, and playing sports and an instrument in the band and performing in the class play and going to horrible assemblies; all of it was forever sidelined by a century-long disdain for the messy beauty of collective educational experiences at public expense. Now families and their children can go to any private education provider, or stay home and work on education modules on the digitizer, or simply purchase a "feed" that connects directly to the brain and dumps whatever knowledge is needed to satisfy that person's life interests or specific job requirements (Anderson, 2002). No muss, no fuss. Very few life experiences accrue today in public view. Students have few failures, no discussions, few teachers, no disagreements, and no joy, no laughter, no pain, no recovery, no chance of happiness, none of it, at least in public. Gone. I "saw" it happen during the past 60 years of my extended life, and degrade at a rate I never saw coming when I died the first time. Maybe Putnam (2001) stewed and studied and lamented the loss of public life; but I saw its death.

Place matters to learning. Several years into my time at Miami University, before public spaces became little more than a social cemetery, which began in 1997 as an education professor, I discovered the Ohio Historical Marker commemorating "The Poet's Shack," a small structure that Miami built in Bishop Woods to house Percy MacKaye. He was a well-known writer of national reputation who became Miami's writer-in-residence from 1920-1924, "the first position of its kind at any American university" (The Poet's Shack, 2024). According to the historical marker, "Robert Frost praised MacKaye for advocating 'to get his fellow poets all fellowships at the universities.'"

When I first discovered the marker and the MacKaye story in the 2010s while walking on campus, I used to sit nearby and think about what it must have been like for Percy to live during the roaring 1920s, in post WWI America, to be a writer of renown, and to be living in this beautiful woods surrounded by the Georgian architecture of Miami's "new" buildings, in a thriving, small Ohio town, with hundreds of university students, no doubt adoring him, listening to and reading his manuscript drafts handwritten with pen and ink, and asking for help with their own writing, staying up late and talking and writing and whatnot.

But by the time I retired in 2035, still mostly cognitively sharp but obviously aging by then at 73, I hadn't seen a student in person in a classroom at Miami since 2032. So, the dream I had lived for so many years—like Percy did in just his four years on campus—by working with students, walking the halls with them, laughing and meeting and becoming friends and colleagues, enjoying meals together up town, all slipped away in a glimpse of a moment. It happened so fast, to me, and we all saw it coming, and just couldn't stop it. Most of us didn't even put up a fight.

People matter to learning. I was one of the last professors to see students in person. I argued out loud on the floor at one convening of faculty and university leaders as the institution prepared to shift itself to an all-online institution, "How can we work with teachers or school leaders who are still seeing students in classrooms if we don't have classrooms? If we don't have students who live with us and come to class? That makes no sense. And what is lost when we abdicate such a significant part of our humanity and educational possibilities to the digital domain to the point that it becomes impossible or unnecessary to ever have a meal with students, to hold their hand when a grandparent passes away, or have an impromptu birthday celebration on the grass under the tree in the courtyard after class?"

The silence from colleagues that hit me after that last plea was deafening, loud. Sometimes silence comes roaring in like a freight train, demolishing you instantly as if you were never there in the first place. I walked away from that meeting defeated, and feeling like a dinosaur, which I was by then. My time had passed.

And the notion of the importance of a public university providing a human, educational experience where people had proximal contact together in a social setting had passed. The state felt little need to fund it, and students didn't think it necessary to spend money living away from home if everything they thought they needed in the moment already existed at arm's length, on their digital machines, while they went to college in their pajamas (I noticed pajama wearing students in class as early as the 2000s, but that's neither here nor there).

But maybe what took my breath away, literally, even more, was what happened to our beautiful campus and what that meant and symbolized. As I sat looking out over Bishop Woods in that place where the poet's shack had stood and thrived a century before, surrounded by students and the buildings and the spring and fall foliage, and imagined the wonder of it all and the long trajectory of educational experiences that had transpired on the grounds of that great university, and felt the distant remnants (merely as a colonizer though) of the love that those who originally inhabited these forests had for the ground and the sky above that had been lost to our progenitors, I also couldn't help but smell the death of it all in the air.

The university was already on its way to the end in the 2030s. By the 2060s, in my second life, I saw it die completely. The pictures of the campus commemorating the forgotten, historic places that occupied mostly untended "websites" on the old internet had one picture of the marker for Percy's Shack that showed it covered in vines, nearly undefinable as a marker as the foliage took over the ground as it once had centuries prior. It felt apocalyptic to me, reminiscent of the feelings that the original film *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner, 1968) stirred in me when the astronaut

played by Charlton Heston realized that they had crashed on the post-nuclear earth after discovering the half-buried Statue of Liberty on a beach. I got that feeling again of missing a deeply lost set of possibilities and the internal horror that came with realizing that what was lost would be absolutely irretrievable. The statue's arm, and Percy's marker, both still have shape and existence, to a degree, but they are both lost.

And so it was that the buildings on the once well-trod grounds—all of them covered in moss and foliage, the sidewalks and streets plowed up and removed from view—as they began to come down one-by-one with the wrecking ball or the pulverizer (a laser technology that reduced non-animate matter to heavy dust). All of it, every last remnant of the university, from piping to buildings to powerlines, save for the historical markers on campus (since the markers, not the university, were still protected by the state), met their demise by 2095. The pulverized dust remnants were routinely deposited on Mars without fanfare.

And Miami University was consolidated into the Midwestern Regional University System completely by 2060, so there was literally, and basically, no remaining recognition by 2090 in the public sphere, except by the few historians located in Washington, D.C., that a place called Miami University ever existed.

Local naturalists and hikers, visitors and campers, looking for something novel to do outside the home, though, visit the site every year. I saw an interview on my Instatell (a device used universally to access the world's knowledge now in the 22nd century) with one family that arrived by teleport on the former campus in beach gear thinking they had programmed their machine for Miami Beach, Florida, but some ancient technical glitch landed them instead in Oxford near the MacKaye marker. They filed a report with the transportation commission and the interview was posted for all travelers to see so they could avoid this kind of serious glitch in the future, and avoid the pitfall of visiting a veritable, though very naturally beautiful now, wasteland.

Service matters to learning. One segment of my life that I have spoken and written very little about since it happened was my lost-cause, service campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives seat in Ohio's 8th District v. John Boehner. I did publish a lightly read memoir about the race (Poetter, 2016), but I haven't revisited the campaign year I spent running for my life much since then. That experience became a very important part of my internal life and had an impact on my actions as a teacher and writer, the things I thought about and cared about and believed in, but I didn't share much about it widely. Truth be told, almost no one in my life ever brought the campaign up in my remaining 38 years on earth after the fact, and a few years after the campaign no students or faculty remembered it or cared about it. That's just how politics works: It embraces you then kicks you to the curb. And that's all right with me.

But recently, I can't shake one particular set of images and feelings about an important interaction I had with a constituent during the campaign, that has resonated with me and driven me and guided me toward this final telling.

I remember taking a long "canvassing" walk in the early Fall of 2014 in Hamilton, Ohio, with one of my staffers. We had some good pockets of constituents that needed to see me in person in that important city in the district. They had been receiving mailers about our campaign and I was working the phones and media as much as possible. But we knew that knocking on doors, by me and by surrogates, was key to winning as many votes as possible and fulfilling the mission of

providing as much representation of ideas and personal qualities that constituents valued and that voters deserved and desired to see in their candidates. So, we walked and talked and knocked on thousands of doors.

At one door I met a young woman who answered while holding her relatively new baby girl. She seemed haggard and harried when she answered the door but warmed up when I said who I was and we began talking, me on the stoop looking up, and her holding the door open with one arm and baby on the other looking down.

I was just going to pitch her and then scurry given her situation, but instead we stood at the door and talked, covering a host of issues over maybe 5-10 minutes. That was longer than I usually spent at any door. My staffers, constantly aware of our goals for numbers of door knocks and the value of everyone's time, frowned on long discussions like that, actually. But she was smart and delightful and engaging in many ways and doing her best as a mom to keep the house going and to work an off-hours job so they could thrive financially in the house and miss as little time as possible with the baby.

And then she stopped, gathered herself, and asked, "Now, I am just curious, where do you stand on gay rights?"

The question didn't seem out of the ordinary, and I considered her a voter, and I had an answer.

"Well, for nearly my entire life I have been aware of and concerned about the difficulties non-straight people have in this world, including several of my faculty colleagues at Miami, and I would do everything in my power as your representative to fight for same-sex couples' constitutional rights, for them to be able to marry freely, and to have full spousal access to healthcare benefits."

Quickly, she hardened, and said without one bit of hesitation, "I should have known you were the devil!" and slammed the door in my face.

I looked at my walking partner, a trusted staffer and dear friend, and he just shrugged his shoulders after I had stumbled backwards off the steps, and as we walked to the next house.

"What was that?" I asked.

"That's a voter, with a strong opinion about one thing. She'll probably still vote for you. Don't sweat it."

But I did sweat it.

And I smiled, actually, and nearly cried all at once, and I wondered and thought about it for 98 years. Unless she got a new life like I did, that voter is gone now, too. When I think of her and all the other people I met on that campaign and in these lives I've led, I think of the wonder and beauty and horror of life in the public sphere, and how much I miss it and will miss it even more when I'm gone (I won't actually know anything then about "missing things," I don't think).

But the thing that bothers me the most as I close this final chapter of life is the loss of public life, our interactions, our face-to-face dealings, our humanity. No matter the unevenness of schooling and the difficulties of delivering it, it made a positive difference, and helped us remain a community, binding us together in so many critical endeavors. No matter the cost of college and the perception that it made no difference in the world once "knowledge" was available to all equally through the old internet machine (it's not, actually), higher education played a role of advancing knowledge and building community around the world. Higher education also had a tremendous impact on the economy, and the loss of colleges and their vibrancy has cost us dearly as a society, as a polity, and as an economic entity. And while campaigns have streamlined and they are more efficient, we have no access to candidates. We never get to meet them or get to know

them, or they us, even for 5-10 minutes on a front stoop. We don't have a chance to malign them at the door and show them our own prejudices and ignorance. We just can't do it anymore, and that may be the biggest loss of all.

I haven't really enjoyed watching the world take shape as a supposed "living being" these past 60 years. It was my own deal with the devil that I was willing to make, but the bottom line of all of it is that we had decisions to make about the course of human endeavor and what it would entail, and we chose poorly.

We could have said, "We all go to school. Let's build education into the fabric of all that we do, through schooling and higher education and the economy. Let's make sure our public institutions, like our polity, have human contact at their core, so we can see and hear and experience the good, the bad, and the ugly of life together, sometimes all at once, like we used to in school, in college, and in public life."

That's life.

I think the formula is super complicated, and just that simple.

I keep reminding myself, now just before the end: I signed up for this...

Goodbye all, my time is up.....



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