

Freshman Common Reading 2014-15

The Postmortal

Faculty/Staff Book Discussion – Debbi Mercado, 7/17/14

“It takes a long time to become young.” ~Pablo Picasso

ICEBREAKER

While we wait for everyone to arrive, chat with your neighbor about Picasso’s quote. What do you think he meant?

Introductions: It would be hard to read *The Postmortal* without looking back on your life and thinking about an age you would still like to be. If you could go back and get the cure, what age would you choose, and on what did you base your choice – happiness, looks, wisdom, life circumstances, relationships, or something else?

GOOD JUDGMENT

“...the first and only thing they think about is, ‘Oh boy, I’m gonna live forever.’ But they don’t stop to consider what that means. They want to live forever, but they don’t think about what they’re going to have to live with” (8). At what age do you think you possessed enough experience and good judgment to make informed, long-term decisions about your life? How might we impress upon students the value of age, experience, and wisdom over youth, looks, and things?

PEER PRESSURE/HERD MENTALITY

As humans, we frequently make choices that we know are not in our best interests. People who took the cure didn’t care about retirement or losing Social Security and Medicare. John says he put the idea of retirement in the **“things I prefer not to think about” pile** (30). How much do you think peer pressure fueled everyone jumping on the bandwagon? Are we any better at resisting peer pressure the older we get?

In the book, Katy admits: **“I’m guessing there will be a point when it’s legal and everyone has it and I feel obligated to get it too. I was like that with cell phones. I was easily the last of my friends to get one”** (58). What qualities are necessary to be a true individual in our world? How many true individuals do you know?

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

From bike helmets, to seat belts, to smoking bans, the government attempts to protect us from our own bad choices. Ronald Reagan once claimed that the “Government exists to protect us from each other. Where government has gone beyond its limits is in deciding to protect us from ourselves.” Is

The Postmortal a cautionary tale about what could happen if the government does NOT protect us from ourselves?

Given the magnitude of his decision, the President's speech was rather simplistic (68). Knowing what went wrong, what parameters should have been in place before making the cure widely available?

RELIGION/ETHICS

“Death is the only thing keeping us in line” (12). Is it?

One approach for ethical decision making is the Utilitarian Approach, which focuses on choosing the action that will produce the greatest benefits and the least harm; the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number. In the postmortal world, only 35 million true organics are left, and most are sick or dying. In such a scenario, is killing the old and sick ethical? Is “end specialization” ethical?

TIME MANAGEMENT/PROCRASTINATION

Other than Sonia's family, there are no characters in the book with solid plans for their extra-long life. Most want to put off responsibility, commitment, and hard work. Assuming that you did not have unlimited funds, how would it affect you to know that you had eons to get an education, start a family, or have a career? What would be the ideal way to organize such a long life?

Sayings like, “He/she has too much time on their hands” or “Idle hands are the devil's workshop” imply a negative outcome of having too much time, yet in our busy world we often wish for more time to do all the things we want or need to do. Which is better – too much time or too little time?

AGING

Bette Davis once said, “Getting old is not for sissies.” Do you think people who want to be young forever are more worried about the void of death or the vagaries of old age?

At first, those who get the cure are hiding from the pro-death groups. In the end, pregnant women and old people are hiding from people who consider them a drain on the resources. In a not-so-distant future world, could this become a reality?

If only the “Skeleton Key” had been available (no cure for aging, only a cure for disease), would as many people have wanted it knowing that they would likely die of old age and all that goes with it?

CAREERS/AMBITION

A number of professionals, like estate lawyers and plastic surgeons, have to re-think their careers to remain relevant in the postmortal world. What other careers would be affected or become obsolete? Are the tech jobs going to be the only “safe” jobs in the future?

The long lost Alison tells John: **“This whole process. Going to the bar. Wedging yourself between people for a drink...This is what I had in my head when I went to the curist. This is what I was looking forward to, all this carousing...I thought it would always be a good time...this scene got old, but I still do it anyway...I think I lack imagination”** (140). Living forever seems rather like summer vacation – there’s always tomorrow. How much do time and deadlines fuel ambition?

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT/GREATNESS/SUCCESS

What would we lose if we received the gift of an endless life?

The great Leonard Bernstein once said, “To achieve great things, two things are needed – a plan, and not quite enough time.” How would the cure affect the professional and creative lives of great athletes, performers, or artists?

“It’s just the cure forcing us to redefine the notion of excellence. This isn’t just a baseball thing...How can you be a success or have a legacy if your career – nay, your entire life – has no definitive story arc?” (110). How would we define success in a postmortal world?

MARRIAGE/FAMILY

An article in the *New York Times* last September claimed that divorce among those 50 and older has risen dramatically because living longer makes staying together through a bad or “stale” marriage “too burdensome” (Roberts). Another article in *The Atlantic* this month wondered if “marriage-shy Millennials might warm to the idea of lifelong commitment as they age” (Green). On both ends of the age spectrum, the idea of marrying for life is not as popular as it once was. Could “cycle marriages” become a valid idea even without “the cure”?

If you are a parent stuck in a time warp, how would this change your ability to parent well?

In one headline, a daughter kills her billionaire father to claim her inheritance (95). Are we a society that believes our parents “owe us” even in death? Is this a uniquely American attitude?

The Texan builds a bomb shelter worthy of a Hollywood movie and stockpiles enough supplies for his family to last for years underground (111). If everything above ground had been obliterated, what would be the point of saving your family?

TECHNOLOGY, THE INTERNET, AND THE MYSTERIOUS “CLOUD”

“...all mentions of [Farrell’s] name in the cloud as it now exists lead to sites whose servers were destroyed during the Great Correction...All U.S. Department of Containment servers were destroyed in June 2079” (1). Given that the government, or those in control of sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., can wipe out our digital lives at their whim, is it wise to support the trend for a paperless society? How does this make you reconsider how you record your important moments and thoughts?

“...the cure for aging must never again be legalized” (2). Hundreds of millions of people around the world jumped at the cure! This quote suggests that we might go back from whence we came, but can we? What current trends are moving at a pace which makes you fear that we will never be able to “un-ring that bell”?

THE ENVIRONMENT

Many are concerned now about dwindling fossil fuels, overconsumption, and its effect on the planet. In the book, a cemetery plot costs \$20,000 per *year* and tap water is \$5 a glass. If the cycle of life is interrupted and everyone lives forever, what other resources or goods will be unaffordable, even unattainable?

THE STORY

Today, more and more young and middle-aged people are being diagnosed with diseases like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s, once thought to be “old people” diseases. Since “the cure” does not prevent death by disease or accident, what do you think the odds could be of actually living hundreds of years? Did you find this aspect of the story distracting?

It is conceivable that a cure for aging could be found in our children’s lifetimes. Imagining such a day, in what ways did Magary’s story seem plausible? What aspects of the story did you find disjointed, overdone, or implausible? Did Magary leave us with any hope?

POSSIBLE RESEARCH TOPICS

- How do countries around the world differ in the way they view and treat their elderly?
- What projects are underway now to discover a cure for aging?
- What are the U.S. laws surrounding assisted suicide? Are they different in other countries?
- Which jobs would become obsolete in a postmortal world, which would simply change to meet the new environment, and what new jobs might be created (like end specialist!)?
- The pro-death trolls (or greenies) are a domestic terrorist group that is against the cure. What is a domestic terrorist group? What other domestic terrorist groups have existed in the United States? What were their causes, and what acts of violence did they commit on U.S. soil?

PROJECTS

- Think about how the cure might have been better handled. Rewrite the President’s speech to include rules and regulations on the cure that would help to keep things from spiraling out of control.
- Videotape an interview with an older member of your family. If they could go back in time and stay one age forever, would they? What age would they choose? On what did they base their decision? Then, explain *The Postmortal* to them. Would they still get the cure? Ask them to name 2 or 3 great things about getting older!
- Choose one of the interesting headlines from the Afternoon Link Roundups. Write your own research questions and a related research proposal. For instance (from page 95), what is the West

Antarctic Ice Sheet, is it endangered now, why is it important, and what are scientists' predictions about its decline?

- What new products might be needed in a postmortal world? Create a product and write an advertising campaign for it. Include a slogan, a logo, and tape a commercial segment. How much would the item cost, who would it appeal to, etc.?
- Consider what qualities would be important to be hired in a postmortal job environment. Create a resume that reflects a long life well-lived. Include education, work experience, extra-curricular activities, and anything else that you think would reflect well on your judgment, priorities, and planning skills.

Sources:

Green, Emma. "Millennials: Society Will Be Just Fine Without Marriage." *The Atlantic*. July 8, 2014.

Roberts, Sam. "Divorce after 50 Grows More Common." *The New York Times*. September 20, 2013.