

## “Chasing Immortality: Would You Want to Live Forever?”

Beacon UU Congregation  
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker  
May 28, 2023

The Renaissance philosopher Montaigne has quipped that “death has us by the scruff of the neck at every moment.” But what if we knew how to escape death’s stranglehold? What if we could live forever? Would you want to?

Immortality might seem like the stuff of fantasy, myth or science fiction, yet its increasingly becoming the focus of real science and billions of dollars in venture capital investments. Jeff Bezos has invested in Altos Labs, Google launched Calico, and Paypal founder Peter Thiel has pledged to “fight death.” Sorry fellas, being rich ain’t gonna save ya, but please, by all means, give it a go.

My favorite example of the tech guru as immortality messiah is Kai Mills, who views death as a software error and has a plan to fix it. The journalist Suzy Weiss spent time with Mills at his home in Utah, where he is experimenting with cryopreserving techniques he plans to use on his parents. As Mormons, he explains, they are just transhumanists who believe they are eternal already.

Last year, Mills launched his company, Cryopets, which aims to preserve our freshly deceased fur babies and eventually humans, forever, or until they can be thawed, healed, or set loose for a Second Coming. Watch out for freezer burn. He’s already experimenting on Jasper, an 80 lb. Labradoodle, with degenerative hip dysplasia. In brief, the process involves a low-pressurized vessel, liquid nitrogen, and a temperature controlled facility. Shout out to my nearly 9 year old pup – “Don’t worry Billie, you’re safe!”

As we know, the practice of cryonics has been around since the 1950’s beginning with the freezing of sperm and then eggs. Apparently about 500 people are in a state of suspended animation globally, including a techno-optimist’s cemetery in Scottsdale, AZ but in the history of the practice, not a single human has ever been revived after being frozen.

According to Weiss, “deciding that death is just another coding error has become something of a Silicon Valley bar mitzvah of late – when you reach a certain age and net worth, it’s time to start figuring out how to live forever.” A portion of the venture money is going into the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other cutting edge biomedicine that could replace joints with AI powered ones and perfect the technology to upload one’s consciousness to the “cloud.” Does my consciousness really want or need to achieve immortality? There are a lot of tumbleweeds up there. Here’s what the cryo-dude in Utah has to say when asked what immortality would be like: “Living forever equals eternal progression. We should become Gods and create for eternity.” Hubris, much?

And the prospect of immortality raises some thorny questions: Would the option be available to everyone eventually or just the wealthy? Could you opt out of eternal life? Would we still gain the empathy, wisdom, and insight that comes with age? Would we care more or less about our relationships?

Trying to live forever is a tale as old as time. Our species oldest story (written 4000 years ago) called “The Epic of Gilgamesh” is about that very longing. After his best friend’s death, this wild beast of a King is forced to confront his own mortality. “Must I die, too?” he cries to the

heavens. He sets out on a mission to overcome death. He fails and uncovers the meaning of life instead.

Popular culture loves to indulge its obsession with plot lines on the topic, too. For instance, in the megahit TV series, “Succession,” we are introduced to a project called *Living Plus* – a luxury senior living development in which only the elite will have access to the latest cutting-edge life extension therapies. Kendall Roy tries to wow his Waystar Royco shareholders with this concept, exhorting them that his communities will enable the lucky residents to live “more forever.” They sit stone-faced. Maybe they were just doing the math and checking their 401ks and stock options. And frankly, living forever isn’t going to make these characters more likeable.

In her popular novel, “Eternal Life,” Dara Horn introduces us to Rachel, a suburban great grandmother, recently widowed with a ne’er-do-well son living in the basement. What her family doesn’t know is that she’s a 2000 some-odd years old woman, who has burned to death and woken up in an 18-year-old body for millennia. This may sound appealing, but for Rachel, her life is coated in thick layers of grief and loss of the score of loved ones who’ve died over time. She’s not fully alive, despite being immortal. Rachel is eager to die but she can’t. “The hard part isn’t living forever,” she observes. “It’s making life worth living.”

And this is true, whether you are eternal, you’re chasing immortality, or none of the above. Life is finite, that’s the point, and the impetus for living life fully and presently. The longevity entrepreneurs either miss this point or are determined to ignore or circumvent it. The writer Barbara Ehrenreich, who has explored many dimensions of a human life, tells us that “realistically, you can think of life as an interruption of eternity and seize it as a brief opportunity to observe and interact with the ever-surprising, pulsing world around us...and within us.”

There are many who voice their dismay over the drive to live forever. Jay Kim, the pastor of the West Gate church in San Jose, California (smack in the middle of Silicon Valley) remarks that “in the digital age we’re losing humility. We may still have curiosity. But we’re losing wonder. Instead, we see everything as a problem to solve, even mortality.” He calls death “a natural part of the human process” and that trying to cheat death with science is arrogant and a massive time waster. Truth is, we can spend thousands of dollars on life extenders, serums, and supplements and still get taken out by an anvil falling from a window.

I’d argue that most of us don’t want to die, or watch our loved ones die, whether its peacefully in best case scenarios or in one of the possibilities offered by my colleague, the Rev. Barbara Merritt in her witty reflection, “Ways I Don’t Want to Die” (Pia read it for us earlier). For example,

- Showing a friend how to use my unloaded handgun.
- Misremembering the rhyme to identify a coral snake.
- Skiing into a tree while on a tryst with my married lover.
- Reassuring my friends, who are frantically leaving the water, “I think I know a dolphin when I see one.”

Merritt makes light of some of the ways folks inadvertently and quite stupidly shuffle off their mortal coil, especially in the TikTok challenge era. As a minister, she ponders death as a matter of course. So do I. Bhutanese folklore says that to be happy, one ought to contemplate death five times a day. The present-day phone app “We Croak” is based on that practice (it sends an alert five times a day that encourages you to contemplate death). What do you think about that? What’s your death pondering quotient – Rarely? Occasionally? Daily? Obsessively?

We may push off these thoughts because they can be scary and unsettling. Yet, I couldn't help but nod and giggle at a recent *New Yorker* cartoon in which a man reads his fortune cookie, with furrowed brow, to his companion. It says, "Someday you will die." Too often, we're so afraid of dying that we forget to live, and we don't like such direct, snarky fortune cookie reminders after our sesame chicken and dumplings.

In his moving reflection, entitled "Fear of Dying," Rabbi Lawrence Kushner underscores this point with his retelling of his own health scare and musing about his mortality. He writes, in such a relatable way: "One minute I'm preoccupied by a thousand daily tasks. And the next, it's as if some hand from out of nowhere has swept everything off the game board and onto the floor and replaced all of my affairs with a medical diagnosis."

Kushner learns that he is not dying, at least not imminently. And he recalls that "Suddenly, everything I did was infused with meaning. I couldn't take anything for granted. The most trivial sensations became gifts. The smell of my child's hair. The sound of the dog barking. My wife's kiss. The morning coffee. Each was too precious to let go of." "Life, you are so sweet," he proclaims, would that there would be some way to get to that heightened gratitude of life without the terror." And I would add - without the counterproductive chase for immortality.

I imagine Kushner would appreciate an article I read this week called "Time Billionaires" by Sahil Bloom. It focuses on an idea first proposed in 2019 by Graham Duncan, the cofounder of East Rock Capital – that we are all "Time Billionaires," and that time is the most valuable and precious resource we possess as humans.

"A million seconds is 11 days," he explains. "A billion seconds is slightly over 31 years. In our culture, we are so focused on money, and we deify dollar billionaires." But, as Duncan points out, "we don't relate to ourselves as the time billionaires we really are. Most of us fail to realize the value of this asset until its gone or dwindled down to reserves." The stoic philosopher Seneca tells us, "We are not given a short life, but we make it short when we are wasteful of it." Being a time billionaire is about embracing the shortness or finitude of life and finding joy in ordinary daily moments of beauty and tragedy, joy and sorrow, the mundane and the exciting, solitude and connection.

In the classic Thornton Wilder play, "Our Town," the character Emily Webb Gibbs, many years dead, is given the opportunity to return home on the occasion of her 12th birthday. Much trivial chattering persists as she observes the scene in the kitchen. Emily turns, anguished, to the Stage Manager, and laments, "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. "She breaks down sobbing. "I didn't realize. So, all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back, up the hill, to my grave. But first, wait. One more look. "

"Good-bye. Good-bye world. Good-bye Grover's Corners...Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking...and Mama's sunflowers. And food, and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you."

She looks towards the Stage Manager and asks, abruptly, through her tears, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? -- every, every minute." "No," replies the Stage Manager, "The saints and poets, maybe -- they do some." And Emily goes back up the hill.

My friends, try to realize life while you are living it. Forget immortality. Be a time billionaire instead, who treats the seconds, minutes, and hours as your ultimate currency. Spend it wisely, with those you love, for causes that matter, in ways you'll never regret. Leave a legacy that your descendants will honor and emulate.

Do not be afraid to die today but expect life. Because life can be so sweet. Life can be a carnival. And it all goes so fast.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

*© 2023 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. All rights reserved. Material may be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.*