

*My rule in making up examination questions is to ask questions which I can't myself answer. It astounds me to see how some of my students answer questions which would play the deuce with me.*

*In search of some rest  
In search of a break  
From a life of tests  
Where something's always at stake  
Where something's always so far  
What about my broken car?  
What about my life so far?  
What about my dream?  
What about...?*

*You must do the thing you think you cannot do.*

*One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead.*

## ***The Future Freaks Me Out (Our Last Days as Children)***

*This is our last chance to spill happy tears  
These memories will stick with us for years  
And we're still young after all  
And I'll see you next fall  
But this summer I admit I fear...*

*I can't begin to explain  
How we disassemble the parts and frame...  
I could have made this work, but all I had was  
The hope that pieces would take shape  
And we could watch them all fall into place...*

*You are educated. Your certification is in your degree. You may think of it as the ticket to the good life. Let me ask you to think of an alternative. Think of it as your ticket to change the world.*

*True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high-school class is running the country.*

*This is water.*

*The time is always ripe to do right.*

*To everything there is a season,  
a time for every purpose under the sun.  
A time to be born and a time to die;  
a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;  
a time to kill and a time to heal...  
a time to weep and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn and a time to dance...  
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to lose and a time to seek;  
a time to rend and a time to sew  
a time to keep silent and a time to speak;  
a time to love and a time to hate;  
a time for war and a time for peace.*

**Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

What time is it now?

Four years ago, on a late-May Wednesday, I attended two events I'd been looking forward to for some time: the Orchesis show and the cross-country signing ceremony. I had more of a connection to Orchesis than usual that year because so many of "my" students took part in it – not just seniors Ada Hon, Adriana Benevento, Anita Su, and Sophia Ning, but juniors Bella Muljana and Tiffany Wu as well. I'd known Bella and Tiffany longest: I had served as their first English teacher at Arcadia High, and they were part of my first freshman class here.

The dancers I watched that night weren't the same people I had met years earlier. Time, and life, had shaped them into very different individuals, not just in age, but in temperament (although Tiffany still swung by my classroom before every Winter Break with a Jamba Juice card; she knew me all too well). To see how far they'd come in such a relatively short time – to watch the dance that Bella choreographed, to see Tiffany perform with such joy – made me proud in a way that only familiarity makes possible. I found myself marveling at how quickly time had passed, and how time seemed to change my students much more profoundly than it was changing me.

But before I went to that particular performance, I headed past the site of my first classroom (now gone) and the place I was interviewed (since replaced), entering the baby-blue district office building where I signed my first contract (bulldozed and erased). My cross-country boys sat around a table in a conference room I hadn't entered since the last time I'd been pink-slipped, and as I looked at them, each decked out in collegiate gear, I tried to remember what they were like when I first met them, back before I'd taught a single class here, back before anyone knew my name.

I attended summer cross-country practices the day after Arcadia hired me, and that's where I met Ben Hsueh and Zack Marriott, Daniel Huang and William Tsai, Esmond Wei and Allen Leung, Eric Garibay and Ammar Moussa. They were very much boys back then, with a ton of raw energy and...questionable maturity. Over four years, I supported them when they fell short, grew frustrated when they bickered, ferried them to what seemed like a hundred different races and practices, and screamed at the top of my lungs when I finally watched them win a national championship from afar. They came to this school when I did, and now here we were, wrapping up our time together after four years spent together. They seemed very ready to leave, eager to carve out new lives for themselves. Looking at them, I thought to myself, *Oh, boys...how did you ever get so old?*

As I stood behind them, smiling for the pictures Zack's father patiently shot, I looked down at the table. On it were a bunch of Letters of Intent, each freshly signed. But I also saw pieces of scratch paper, white expanses interrupted by a dozen different scribbled versions of their names. Some of the athletes had been practicing their signatures before they put pen to paper. I can't remember not knowing exactly how my signature would look. The facsimile on my driver's license comes from the time I scribbled it onto a pressure-sensitive pad at the DMV when I was seventeen. My signature still looks that way, over a full decade later.

I looked at those Letters of Intent, looked at the scratch paper, at the kids who had become young men since I started teaching, at the people whose signatures hadn't been etched in stone yet, and realized that there was so much I still had left to teach them, that I wished we had more time left to spend...but that they were ready to leave anyway, even though they were unfinished, even though they were still changing.

And I realized that they'd be standing in my shoes before they knew it.

We live in a quickly changing world, and we change just as quickly.

Our authors this semester explored those changes, studying what humanity could/would willingly sacrifice in the name of convenience, in the name of avoiding the problems that plagued our ancestors, in the name of simple safety, in the name of preserving a way of life to which we'd grown accustomed. We seem so driven by the desire for *more* – more money, more ease, more health, more security, more time – and so heedless of what they might cost to obtain. And Ishiguro, Vonnegut, Orwell, Huxley, even Aronofsky – all came up with the same cost: our humanity.

Yet it's not enough to say that the future freaked Orwell out, or Ishiguro out, or Vonnegut out. Their work demands no less than a just, equitable path for human development and coexistence, one built on respect, compassion, and connection – and it aims to help people take their first steps along that path. They're not simply concerned with the possibility that we could lose our humanity; they're curious about what we'd do to get it back. Do we stand for these changes? Do the Hailsham students deserve better than a half-life? Do they deserve lives and consciousness *at all*? Should we accept things as they are just because progress pointed us in the direction that took us there?

I've asked you to spend this semester looking at what exactly makes up "humanity," and we've started grappling with the important questions that will shape the human future your generation ushers in. I assume that most of you see our likely future unfolding differently than our authors did, but to tell you the truth, I don't know what you'd see if I asked you to think about what the world will look like in a decade. (I mean, did you think the world would look this way when you were eight? What did you think it would look like? Weren't we supposed to be driving flying cars by now, or using a transporter, or living on the moon?)

I've asked you to look at the past and the present, to examine the world around you and the world inside yourself. I've asked you to do this because I dare to dream that the world can still be better – that we can build a better one. I do this because I've seen the problems that have thwarted the generations before mine, and because I believe that yours can help solve them.

I gave some of you the Ecclesiastes quote on your syllabus, back on the day we met nine months ago, because each line applies surprisingly well to senior year itself – to prom, to graduation, to the fraying of relationships as we attempt to sew them up, and to that sense of planting seeds in the fresh soil of a new land. All of that business about embracing, and mourning, and laughing, and dancing – great stuff.

You're on your way out. The plane is circling, coming in to land.

And now that we're heading for the big goodbye, I wanted to bring that quote full circle.

I think, for some of you, the present feels like it should be the time for rest. You've fought your hardest academic battles. A few things remain – a blog here, a test there – but they're literally nothing you've never handled before. Just getting to this point, I imagine, was exhausting. And some of you, feeling like you've conquered your way here, probably just want to hang up your figurative weapons, shed your suit of armor, and sleep the sleep of the just.

Understand this: It's no longer a battle. Not for points, not for grades, not for any of the old enemies you fought for all those years. In these classes, it never has been about that.

You have always had the right to choose. You have always had the right to mess with my assignments' designs, to tweak things until they were meaningful, to pursue new avenues of inquiry when it felt like everyone had already pursued the old ones. You have always had the right to recognize the water.

That's why you were never "doing my work." What does "my work" even look like? (He asks this while sitting beside a pile of posters that no outside observer would ever guess came from the same assignment...and having read some of these, honestly, I can safely say that your creativity well outstrips any guidelines I could've assigned.)

No, I've told you the truth every single time I clicked through the header that kicked off the PowerPoints: All I ever gave you was myself...a place...and time.

Time to contemplate birth and death, hate and love, and the ways in which they all get mixed up in each other;

to weigh whether killing ever spurs healing, or war ever spurs peace;

to determine what, exactly, we should embrace, and what we should reject;

to study the ways people handle all the losing, weeping, and mourning that seems to accompany so much of life;

to be reminded that the laughing, dancing, and seeking that accompanies the rest of it should never be forgotten or undervalued in the face of all that;

and to understand the necessity of tearing some things down for good, and the necessity of rehabilitating and re-sewing what sometimes gets torn, even when it hurts.

At the beginning of this post, I asked you, rhetorically, what time it was now...

...But I think you already know.

It's time to plant something. Time to leave some seeds behind – for yourself, re-reading these entries in college (I know you can't imagine yourself doing so, but you wouldn't believe how many people do – it's the main reason I don't delete them when you go), and for the classes that follow you.

So take off the school-armor. Lay down your sword. Forget the old fights. Go do the slow work. Take your time, tend the land, and grow something beautiful – not because I demand that you do, but because you have always had the power to choose to do it. And now, nothing's stopping you.

One part this week.

A second part next week.

And the final part the week after.

Whatever you do, don't keep silent.

Now is not the time.

As I left the Orchestris show that night, I thought about all the ways my recent past, present, and future had been rammed together of late. 2011 had been a particularly tough year for me, a time when a great many things either ended or threatened to do so. I imagine many of you feel the same way about this year, albeit for different reasons.

Honestly, I don't know whether this is a good time for you or a bad one. All I know is that these days, your last days as children, are memorable, no matter how you're spending them.

In a few weeks, you'll leave class after a bell for the last time. You'll walk out the door into a sunny afternoon.

Twenty-four hours later, the Arcadia High School campus will be a relic of your past – an immediate past, but a relic all the same.

There's no moving backward through time, so we might as well look forward at that point to the rapidly approaching future.

After all, it's not like anyone tells you when it's OK to start making a difference.

You just start making one.

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- + What will the better world look like if we build it...and would you like it better than this one?
  - + What will the country look like in five or ten years? What will you be talking about when you come back for your reunions? What about when your children finish studying in their futuristic Feraco classes and graduate from Arcadia High?
  - + What do you think the future holds for us? Are we moving in a positive direction as human beings, or sliding backwards? Do you feel hopeful about the future? Worried? Conflicted? Pessimistic? Are you particularly excited about any future possibilities? Are there things you feel we *shouldn't* mess with, study, or explore?
  - + Are we getting closer to fulfilling our potential? Do you think humanity will reach it within your lifetime? What is our ultimate potential as a species? Do you believe the things we've studied this semester – the ways we pursue scientific knowledge, the ways we preserve stories and memories, the ways we try to define what is and isn't OK in schools and government and society – hold the key to determining where we'll go?
  - + How will you be part of our future? How will you help us build a better world?
  - + For those of you who wrote responses to *Will the Future Blame Us?* during the first semester: Have those lists of yours changed at all in the past year? Has anyone around you surprised you by how much they've grown/matured since we started our studies together? Has anyone surprised you in the opposite way?
  - + Just as "I am me, you are here, and it is today" always carried a secret meaning, so, too, did my other questions: "Are you ready? Are you steady?" So few of you ever answered them; so many of you stayed silent.

Well...are you ready yet?

Are you steady yet?

Are you better than both?

Or are your heads spinning around?

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Blog Title: "The Future Freaks Me Out," Motion City Soundtrack, *I Am the Movie* and "Our Last Days as Children," Explosions in the Sky, *Friday Night Lights Soundtrack*

Quotes on the First Page: Henry Brooks Adams, Carbon Leaf, Eleanor Roosevelt, Oscar Wilde, The Naked and Famous, Broadway Calls, Tom Brokaw, Kurt Vonnegut, David Foster Wallace, Martin Luther King, Jr.

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