

*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?

A few years ago, on a Wednesday in late May, I attended two events I'd been looking forward to for some time: the ending Orchestras show and the cross country signing ceremony. I had a stronger-than-usual connection to Orchestras 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). To see how far they'd come in the short time since they'd entered AHS – 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 that time seemed to bring such profound and rapid change for my students.

But before I went to that particular performance, I'd walked past the site of my first classroom (now gone) and the place I was interviewed (since replaced) to the baby-blue district office building where I signed my first contract (since bulldozed and erased). Several senior cross country runners sat around a table in a conference room, one I hadn't entered since the last time I'd been pink-slipped. 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 me by my last name alone.

I'd started attending cross-country practices the day after Arcadia hired me, and in the months that followed, I met freshman versions of Ben Hsueh and Eric Garibay, Daniel Huang and Ammar Moussa, Esmond Wei and Allen Leung, Zack Marriott and William Tsai. They were very much boys back then, with a ton of raw energy and what could charitably be called "questionable" maturity. Over the four years, I praised their incredible successes, supported them when they tried hard and fell short, grew frustrated when they bickered, ferried them to what felt like a hundred different races and practices, and screamed at the top of my lungs in my apartment 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 snapped, 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 variations of the boys' 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 handwriting's improved since then, but my signature still looks roughly the same.

I looked at those Letters of Intent, looked at the scratch paper, at the boys who had grown into young men since I'd started teaching, at these 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. At the same time, I recognized that they were ready to leave anyway, even though they were unfinished, even though they were still changing. They were hungry to make their marks on the world, even if they weren't quite yet sure how they wanted that mark to look.

And I thought: *What a wonderful time to be living in.*

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We live in a rapidly changing world, and it can feel like a tall order just trying to keep up with it all. Language, fashion, art, technology, education, politics, economics, even social mores: pick anything that you find interesting and important, and chances are it'll be very different by the time fifty years have passed.

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 seeking safety or wealth, in the name of preserving a way of life to which we'd grown accustomed. The cultures of the developed world often seem so driven by the desire for more – more money, more ease, more health, more security, more time – that they are heedless (at times) of what those things might cost to obtain. Ishiguro, Vonnegut, Orwell, Huxley, Rivera, even Aronofsky – all came up with the same potential cost for “more,” even if they defined it differently: our humanity.

These artists also shared a profound interest in humanity's priors, biases, and beliefs, and in whether individuals could understand their own effectively enough to see how they informed their choices and perspectives. It's so easy, particularly during periods of great change, to forget to question the beliefs underpinning our philosophies. Flowers, Gawende, King, and numerous others remind us to guard against assumptions that prevent honest evaluations of new ideas and proposals, even while noting that progress is often slow, incremental, and messy.

Yet it's not enough to say that the future freaked these thinkers out. Nor would I assert that these authors believed that the things I listed earlier lack value. People *do* need security and solutions. Culture and health *are* worth preserving. The question becomes one of cost – not whether the cost is appropriate, but whether it is necessary. And the cost is only necessary if it's paid in pursuit of a noble goal, pursued in the fairest, most effective way.

The works we've studied during the past few months demand no less than a just, equitable path for human development and coexistence, one built on opportunity, respect, compassion, and connection. They aim to help people take their first steps along that path – to give readers insights into the lives of people living on the margins and in the shadows, to highlight whatever is important and too-often forgotten, and to force audiences to reckon with the costs of their choices.

Ultimately, the authors are not simply concerned with the possibility that we could lose our humanity; they're curious about what we'd do to save it, to recover it, or to move our pursuit of it forward. Can we overcome our impulses towards tribalism and exclusivity? Can our philosophical and spiritual pursuits keep pace with our relentless need to explore and examine? Can we compete healthily, not rapaciously? Can education counteract fear and prejudice? Can we extend access to all human beings, not just those who claimed it first? Can we be brave enough to evolve while still remembering who we are?

These are huge questions! Yet they're not the only ones you'll face, nor the only ones you'll personally want to answer – or see answered.

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 together, we can build a better one, a stronger one than we've ever had at any point in human history, if for no other reason than we've never included so many people in our efforts before.

I've seen the problems that have thwarted the generations before mine, and because I believe that yours can help mine solve them.

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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.

No, I've told you the truth every single time I clicked through the header that kicked off the PowerPoints, every time I said "I am me, you are here, and it is today": All you ever needed me to give you was myself...a good 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.

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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 (some of you don't think you will, 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. 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.

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As I left the Orchesis show that night, I thought about all the ways my recent past, present, and future had been rammed together of late. That 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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+ For those of you who once wrote responses to *Will the Future Blame Us?* during the first semester: Have those friend-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?

+ 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, etc. – hold the key to determining where we'll go?

+ How effectively do you question and reexamine your own beliefs? Do you look at problems and invent creative responses, or do you find yourself often feeling like those problems are too complex to be solved?

+ Which issues matter most to you as “going concerns” moving forward? Which are you likely to address through your career, through your volunteer work, through your friendships and social circle, through your votes and advocacy, through your donations, through your parenting?

+ 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?

+ How will you be part of our future? How will you help us build a better world? What will the better world look like if we build it...and would you like it better than this one?

+ 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? What do you think the future holds for us?

+ 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?

Or do you feel your head spinning around as you near the finish line?

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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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