

While the State of California ponders whether it will allow Thomas Donaldson to have his head surgically removed and frozen before he dies of a brain tumor, some of us are wondering just what's going on in Donaldson's head right now.

Donaldson, a mathematician and computer programmer from Sunnyvale, is suing for the right to have his head placed in cryonic suspension before he dies a natural death. And the Alcor Life Extension Foundation wants to help out -- for an advance fee of \$35,000.

Cryonics enthusiasts have been getting their dead heads and entire corpses (current cost -- \$100,000) frozen for years now. They hope that scientists of the future will be able to revive them and cure whatever killed them, like in Woody Allen's "Sleeper." Most scientists of the present scoff at such beliefs.

But in 1987, one University of California researcher pumped out his dog's blood, replaced it with anti-freeze, put her on ice for over an hour, reversed the process, and voila! The dog survived, although last we heard, dog and scientist were no longer living together. Such experiments have convinced Donaldson and other cryonics advocates that they, too, will have an even better chance at successful "reanimation" if they can be frozen alive.

Several disturbing questions come to mind at this point, all of them so tasteless that polite reporters have refrained from asking them and the public remains unenlightened.

What future human is going to volunteer his torso and limbs so that Mr. Donaldson's head can live again? And what if this future Frankenstein's head and body can't agree on basic questions, like what to eat and who to have sex with? The cryonics boosters are way out ahead of us on this one.

Some cryonicists believe in a hypothetical future science they call "nanotechnology," in which they will be injected with microscopic robots capable of restructuring their bodies molecule by molecule. Others take the theory a step further: new bodies will be cloned from their frozen heads -- or even their noses, like the "beloved leader" in "Sleeper."

Donaldson is opting for "neurosuspension," although we think he should consider "whole body suspension" and cloning a new head, since his present body, at least, seems to be working just fine. He argues that his body can be recloned or replaced, but if the cancer has already destroyed his brain tissue, the new he won't be him: "I'm in my brain," he says.

Other cryonicists are prepared to eschew a body altogether. They see hope in the field of artificial intelligence, which may someday allow the contents of their frozen brains to be "downloaded" into computers. Obviously these "downloaders" don't care about the pleasures of the flesh.

Another question they haven't considered is whether the perfect society they envision will have any use for computers containing their outmoded brains. While the (mostly male) cryonicists may believe they are brilliant, others among us suspect they are computer nerds whose brains are already damaged by too much bad science fiction. Or maybe no one ever told them Woody Allen was a comedian.

For that matter, why would our great-great grandchildren want to bring all those extra bodies and cerebral units back to life? The world is already overpopulated, and disease and death are Mother Nature's main tools for keeping a bad situation from getting completely out of hand.

Easy, the cryonicists say. In this future society, those of us who have the foresight to freeze ourselves will be able to avail ourselves of space colonization, unlimited resources, and a perfected medical technology. One enthusiast imagines eternal life in a space capsule

where jazzy music plays, "Baby It's Cold Outside."

Not everyone finds this an appealing vision, but those who do can get some of their questions answered at cryonics conventions, like the "Reanimation Conference" which took place in Ontario, California two weeks ago. [May 4-7] Speakers addressed such topics as "How to Take Your Money With You" and "Returning to Society After Being Reanimated," as well as the latest scientific advances.

Most cryonicists are true believers in science, all too prone to make blasphemous jokes like "Many are cold, but few are frozen." But a few cryonicists in California are forming a support group for Christians to help them combat such bigotry, as well as prejudice from their "deathist" families and friends. We hope they will address the sticky theological questions: is Donaldson's cryonic suicide justifiable if he can lead a healthier, more meaningful life in the future? Surely cryonics couldn't have been what Jesus had in mind when he promised resurrection and everlasting life?

The rest of us must decide whether we want to risk being reanimated for study by archeologists and experimental psychologists of the future. Meanwhile, the cryonicists are counting on us to keep them cool until we develop the science that will reanimate them on a planet where all problems have been solved. No one can afford to stay frozen that long.

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