



Recapturing the Magic of Living: A Review of the film *Big Fish*

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As a film, *Big Fish* is a beautiful reflection on the meaning of being human. It is a whimsical story of love found and love lost, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of living a full and happy life, and of embracing death. *Big Fish* is the story of a son's desire to separate the facts and the fictions of his dying father's life. The film opens with the father telling the story of the big fish that couldn't be caught. Deciding to use his wedding ring as bait, since "some said that fish was the ghost of Henry Walls, a thief who'd drowned in that river 60 years before," he catches the fish on the day his son is to be born. He cannot kill it, however, when he realizes that the fish is really a "lady fish," "fat with eggs." The father finishes the story:

Now, you may well ask, since this lady fish wasn't the ghost of a thief,
why did it strike so quick on gold when nothing else would attract it?
That was the lesson I learned that day, the day my son was born.
Sometimes, the only way to catch an uncatchable woman is to offer her a
wedding ring.

Thus begins a delightful story full of tall tales and poignant metaphors depicted as one would imagine them to be. Woven throughout is the story of Will's (the son) own journey to weed out the truth behind his father's fantastic life. It is a film I would heartily recommend, offering only one suggestion: be willing to laugh and cry at its simple beauty. This suggestion comes from my fear that we have lost perspective on the story of what it means to be human and have left no room in our imagination for a sense of wonder in understanding our humanness. Stories like this can be a modern parable of our experiences and may help us see more clearly who we are.

If I sound a bit melodramatic, then consider the Chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, Leon Kass's, own admonishment: "We are slow to think about the need to uphold human dignity and the many ways of doing and feeling and being in the world that make human life rich, deep, and fulfilling. Indeed, it sometimes seems as though our views of the meaning of our humanity have been so transformed by the technological approach to the world that we may be in danger of forgetting what we have to lose..."—an understanding of what it means to be human. This is from the introduction of *Being Human*, the most recent publication from the Council. This collection of writings over the centuries captures in prose and poetry the expansive power and grace of the human experience.

The following poem by nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman is one of the selections from *Being Human*:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before
me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide,
and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with
much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

I ask: As patients and physicians, as laymen and clergy, as students and scientists, have we found the *proofs* and *figures*, *ranged in columns* before ourselves, the *charts and diagrams*, to *add, divide, and measure* our humanity? Are we unable to look at our humanity *in perfect silence* and see the beauty of what it means to be made in the image of God? Are we so jaded that even the phrases "image of God" and "being human" no longer have meaning? I suggest our jadedness comes as a result of our all-consuming quest to quantify our human experience—in the process we have lost ourselves in all the details. Like Will, maybe we are so devoted to the facts of life that we can no longer comprehend the magic of living. ■

Editors Note: For more information on the book *Being Human* visit the Council's website, www.bioethics.gov/bookshelf.

News from the Field

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South Korean Scientists Clone Human Embryos

Scientists in South Korea have announced that they have successfully created cloned human embryos—the first announcement of its kind to be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

The researchers took 242 eggs from 15 egg donors, successfully created 30 blastocysts, and established one embryonic stem cell line. Prior announcements of successful human cloning such as those by Advanced Cell Technology, Italian reproductive specialist Severino Antinori, and Clonaid (a company tied to the Raelian cult group) could not be independently reviewed or verified.

The article was published in the journal *Science* and included detailed descriptions of the cloning methods with explanations of what worked and what didn't. The descriptions provided a very clear roadmap for other researchers to carry the work forward. Interestingly, the scientists suspended their efforts subsequent to the announcement in order to have an "ethical review" of the practice.

PCB Dismisses Two Members, Adds Three New Ones

The President's Council on Bioethics has dismissed two of its members and added three new ones as it moves on to address new topic areas. The dismissed Council members were Elizabeth Blackburn, a cell biologist at University of California San Francisco and former president of the American Society of Cell Biology, and William F. May, retired professor of ethics from Southern Methodist University. Both members had opposed the position of Council Chairman Leon Kass and the Bush Administration on cloning.

The changeover brought an immediate outcry from Kass's opponents who claimed that he was attempting to stack the Council with ideologically-friendly members, a claim that Kass fervently denied. Kass responded to critics in a *Washington Post* op-ed citing the fact that the Council would be moving to "focus on issues of neuroscience, brain and behavior" as an appropriate reason to replace Blackburn, a cell biologist, with Dr. Benjamin Carson, director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Children's Center in Baltimore. May had indicated a desire to leave the Council since he had retired from teaching.

The other two additions to the Council are Diana J. Schaub, political scientist from Loyola College, in Maryland, and Peter A. Lawler, a government professor at Berry College in Georgia. There had already been one open vacancy on the Council when Steven Carter of Yale University resigned in 2002 due to lack of time to participate.

Doctors Begin Screening Patients for Malpractice Claims

A new web site designed to enable doctors

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