

Friday, May 28, 2004

Picture Pilliod gulping down stiff lemonade on Buttercup

Rachel Pilliod, former ASUO president during 2002-2003, sits on the State Board of Higher Education. She is a senior majoring in political science and women's and gender studies. Pilliod sat down with the Emerald for Quick Quacks — a short question-and-answer session aimed at giving readers a look at campus and community members' thoughts.

Emerald: What's the best restaurant in Eugene?

Pilliod: Currently I like the Lucky Noodle.

Emerald: What's harder, being ASUO president or being on the State Board of Higher Education and, somewhat hopelessly, trying to make higher education affordable?

Pilliod: Being ASUO president.

Emerald: Why?

Pilliod: More hours.

Emerald: If you had a yacht, what would you name it?

Pilliod: Buttercup.

Emerald: Who is to blame for the high price of education?

Pilliod: The voters.

Emerald: Taylor's or Rennie's?

Pilliod: Rennie's, hands down.

Emerald: Drinking a ...?

Pilliod: Rennie's Lemonade.

Emerald: Where will Rachel Pilliod be in five, ten and 20 years?

Pilliod: Five, medical school. Ten, probably finishing up my residency. Twenty, probably back in Portland.

Emerald: What's the last Oregon athletic event you attended?

Pilliod: Basketball game. Men's basketball ... Not true! I went to my friend's Club sports soccer game.

Emerald: What's the most interesting thing Bill Clinton had to say when you met him?

Pilliod: I can't really remember, it's all pretty much a blur.

Emerald: Anything stand out at all?

Pilliod: Yeah, out of all the politicians ... he was the only one to say 'hello' to me and everybody else on stage.

Emerald: Critique the 2003-2004 ASUO Executive. Was it a success?

Pilliod: I thought you'd ask me this, too. I should've thought about this more. I think certain elements of it were successful. I think it's also very difficult to run any successful campaign in a non-Legislative year. It's just harder to quantify results. But I'm excited about the housing (standards). I'm glad they did the Venus Festival again.

Emerald: What's the last book you read, and why did you read it?

Pilliod: Book of poetry my grandmother gave me, because my grandmother gave it to me.

Emerald: Where can Rachel Pilliod be found on a typical Friday night?

Pilliod: At work until probably six or seven. Then at the movies.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Olympic policy editorial exhibits lack of research

Thanks, guys, for another fine piece of journalism ("New Olympic transgender policy creates inequity issue," ODE, May 20).

The anxieties people have about things they don't really know anything about are always fascinating. The androgen blockers that transwomen take before surgery lower their testosterone levels below what non-trans women produce naturally.

It's not like you should be expected to know that; it's a pretty detailed piece of information about an issue that is widely misunderstood. But you should be expected to do a modicum of research before publishing arrogant, long-winded diatribes about issues with which you are completely unfamiliar.

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Eric Layton Illustration

HUMANS MADE TO ORDER

Back in the politically quieter summer of 2001, a few (evidently shortsighted) pundits suggested that President Bush's decision on stem cell research would be the most momentous of his tenure. After all, what could possibly be so controversial, what could so preoccupy commentators, as how we treat the very seeds of human life?

That fall, of course, the deaths of about 3,000 people in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks changed what Americans — and their president — saw as important. Since then, the political and economic fallout of the attacks — not to mention the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq — have eclipsed most of the media attention once allocated to bioethics issues.

And while terrorism and U.S. foreign policy obviously merit much attention and discussion, cutting-edge biological research — work that often raises thorny moral questions — has progressed unabated, albeit under the surface of popular consciousness.

For example, shortly after Sept. 11, the Center for Human Reproduction announced that it would offer gender selection by in vitro embryo creation and testing at its clinics in New York and Illinois. (About this time, an American Society for Reproductive Medicine official wrote a letter endorsing this method for "family gender balancing.")

For some time, couples have been able to stack the genotypic odds of having a child of a preferred sex. For example, spinning a sperm sample in a centrifuge often does the trick: Heavier, X chromosome, girl-spawning sperm is spun to the outside; while the lighter, Y chromosome, boy-making sperm sits in the middle. Some companies claim an 80 percent success rate with this method, but it's still far from foolproof.



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But picking a gamete from a sperm sample is innocuous; creating, selecting and destroying embryos is an altogether stickier proposition ethically (forgive the pun). After all, the destruction of embryos — cell masses with the potential to develop into biologically independent humans — lies at the center of the stem cell debate. (Ends don't justify means, but it's worth noting here that gender selection is probably of more dubious value than, say, researching potential therapies for life-threatening illnesses.)

Suppose experts and society accept this technique. Issues of gender discrimination aside (such concerns are obviously important, but are outside the scope of this piece), it's not much of a leap from picking zygotes by sex chromosomes to selecting zygotes by genes, or even modifying individual genes. (A zygote, a cell formed by the fusion of a sperm and egg, undergoes mitosis, successively splitting to form an embryo.)

Genetically "fixing" a zygote's predisposition for hemophilia, leukodystrophy, progeria or any other of a myriad of genetic disorders, should be acceptable to all but the most restrictive interpretations of how man should be allowed to tamper with nature (whatever that might mean). But what about less "essential" traits, those that don't (or shouldn't)

materially affect quality of life? Should a parent be able to pick eye color or hair color? What about handedness? Height? Skin color?

Still, phrased as such, this discussion begs the question, "What is essential?" With corrective lenses, my vision is better than 20/30, but I still need lenses to drive, not to mention recognize my friends at 30 feet. My nearsightedness thus constitutes an inconvenience, but isn't life-threatening; ought that be correctable?

And what about brain power? Some early evidence suggests at least a partial genetic basis for intelligence. Is it okay to preemptively 'cure' retardation? What about mere mental dullness?

In November 2001, Massachusetts-based Advanced Cell Technology, Inc. announced that it had removed DNA from human eggs, cloned embryos and coaxed it to grow into a six-cell mass. The short of it: If you implanted such a cell, you could get a cloned human.

Once largely the domain of a distant science fiction future, many medical and genetic possibilities are very real and offer unimaginable potential, both good and bad. Nanomolecular cures for cancer? Cloning? A baby with three biological parents? Or maybe seven? Prevention of genetic diseases? Life extension? Replacement organs grown to order?

Previously hypothetical discussions about many bioethical dilemmas are becoming very applicable, and demand the public attention they haven't received in recent years.

The future, it seems, is now, and we ought to start discussing it accordingly.

Contact the editorial editor at traviswillse@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.