

My Background in Cryonics

by Charles Platt

I encountered the realities of death when I was about 12 years old. My great-aunt had died unexpectedly of a heart attack, and I found myself at her funeral, surrounded by adults who expressed sadness but resignation. After a minister tried to ease everyone's pain by assuring us that our loved one had made a transition to the hereafter, we went home to continue our lives.

For me, it was not so simple. My great-aunt had been a sweet-natured, gentle woman who used to enthrall me with stories of her travels through colonial Africa. She had ridden elephants; she had cooked meals over a camp fire in the wilderness; she had killed poisonous spiders in her tent. I could not resign myself to the sudden loss of such a unique person, with all her traits and memories.

I was angry that other people seemed so complacent about mortality. When I expressed my anger, other people became angry with me. They told me I should stop "being morbid" and learn to enjoy life.

Well, I did enjoy my life. I saw my own mortality as a source of regret, but not of fear. What bothered me was that so long as I lived, I would have to deal with the pain of losing other people whom I loved.

Taking the Tour

In 1988, when I was 43 years old, I found an opportunity to tap the power of my anger about death and direct it usefully. My friend Gregory Benford, a plasma physicist and science-fiction writer, was attending an academic conference in Riverside, California. With him was Joe Haldeman, another science-fiction writer. Haldeman had heard that there was a cryonics

organization in Riverside named Alcor Foundation, and he found it listed the phone book. Someone at Alcor agreed that a couple of science-fiction writers would be welcome, so Benford and Haldeman took time away from their conference for a quick visit.

A few days later, Benford told me about it on the phone, sounding impressed by what he had seen. "I really think they may be on to something," he said.

I was skeptical, but I was also intrigued, so I contacted Ed Ferman, the editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. I asked him if I could write an article about Alcor, and he agreed.

My tour of the facility was conducted by Alcor's then-president, Michael Darwin, who seemed just as angry about death as I was, but much better informed. I asked every conceivable question, and received answers that I found logically impregnable. I concluded that under ideal circumstances, after plausible developments in nanotechnology, revival from cryopreservation could occur. The only remaining question in my mind was the chance of success for me if I signed up for the procedure.

I considered the biological and engineering problems that still had to be overcome. I also reviewed the uncontrollable factors that could interfere, such as bankruptcy or hostile takeover of the cryonics organization, general socioeconomic collapse, devastation caused by warfare, legislation that might outlaw cryonics or make it prohibitively expensive, or equipment failure. There was also the possibility of dying in such a way that I might be undiscovered until irreversible brain damage had occurred. Adding it all up, I guessed that the chance of a cryopatient being revived in the future might be about 1 in 10,000.

These odds were unattractive. However, as cryonicists always like to say, the alternative was worse.

A few weeks later, I sent Alcor \$20 for an associate membership. It took me quite a while to take the next step, but eventually I obtained a whole-life insurance policy and executed cryopreservation documents.

Improving the Odds

Now that I had committed myself, I was motivated to do anything that might improve my odds. An important factor was the financial security of Alcor, and one way to strengthen the organization would be by encouraging membership growth.

In my primary occupation as a writer, I had contributed a couple of articles to *Omni* magazine. This seemed an ideal place to publicize cryonics, so In 1991 I wrote a one-page opinion piece for *Omni* titled “Confessions of a Cryonicist,” describing my own decision to sign up. At the bottom of the page, I included Alcor’s 800 number.

I was told that this short column stimulated more information requests than any other single piece of publicity that Alcor had received over the years. I soon received a phone call from legendary activist Saul Kent, who wanted to find out how useful I could be in promoting cryonics in the future. He passed my phone number to Brenda Peters, who was in New York City, where I was living at the time. Brenda called me, and I became acquainted with her and her husband Courney Smith. They were running the New York chapter of Alcor at that time.

We discussed many approaches to the general problem of rousing serious interest in cryonics. My piece in *Omni* had only worked because of what Saul Kent described accurately as “the power of a testimonial.” I didn’t think I would be so effective if I wrote another testimonial for another magazine, so I had to think of something new.

Giving It Away

Contests are a basic tool in PR. Automobile companies give away free cars on game shows; why couldn’t Alcor give away a free freeze? I sensed that it would attract a lot of publicity, as it would be the first contest of its kind.

After a board meeting, Alcor approved the idea in principle, so I went back to *Omni*, which I still considered the ideal market, with its paid

circulation approaching 1 million. I suggested that they could sponsor the contest as a cover feature. My editor agreed, but only if he didn't have to pay anything toward the cost of the prize. After some negotiation, Alcor agreed to do it on condition that *Omni* would give them a couple of complimentary full-page ads.

I wrote an article promoting the contest, and I wrote and designed the free ads. The contest attracted the publicity that I had expected, including many interviews for me on talk radio and an hour on a nationally networked TV show. The PR department at *Omni* estimated that one way or another, the existence of the contest was communicated to around 30 million people.

To enter the contest, the only requirement was to write a one-page essay explaining why a person would like to be cryopreserved in the hope of future life. This was a chance at biological immortality. It might not be a large chance, but it was certainly greater than zero, and it was available for the cost of a piece of paper, an envelope, and a postage stamp. (This was before the ubiquity of email.)

We received slightly more than 300 entries. If *Omni's* estimate of audience penetration was correct, about 1 person in 100,000—that is, 0.001 percent—had felt it was worth their while. Evidently, cryonics was such a hard sell, most people weren't interested even if we tried to give it away.

News media loved cryonics, because the concept was an attention-getter. But the vast majority of the population was not willing to take it seriously.

Around this time, I remember explaining the basics of cryonics to another science-fiction writer, Barry Malzberg, when we were eating lunch together in a New York deli. Barry became so agitated, he didn't finish his sandwich. "You're like a company selling tickets for a rocket to Mars," he said. "But you don't even know how to get there!" He paused, thinking it through. "But it's worse than that. You don't even know how to build the rocket!" He thought some more. "No, it's even worse than that! You don't even know anyone else who knows how to build the rocket. You're hoping that someone in the future will figure out how to do it."

This was basically correct. The difference between myself and Barry was that I felt that defeating mortality was so important, it justified some risk, so

long as the organizations offering the service were entirely open about the procedure.

I suspected that most people didn't see it my way. They were more likely to share Barry's outlook, and I didn't know how to convince them to change their minds.

We Don't Have Anyone Else

Saul Kent had put in his own time trying to promote cryonics for many years before me, and had reached the conclusion that his efforts were unproductive. He concluded that the right approach was to improve procedures to the point where the plausibility of cryonics became self-evident. Then, people would be interested in it. With this in mind, he had started to invest large sums in research.

I didn't have the money to do that, but I had some free time, so I started helping out with cases. By 1995 I understood all the procedures and was well acquainted with almost all the principal activists, and when CryoCare Foundation was created as a spinoff from Alcor, I served as its vice-president for three years before eventually becoming its president.

Meanwhile, in my professional life as a journalist, I had become one of three senior writers for *Wired* magazine. When this work ended in 2001, I was left wondering what to do with myself. CryoCare had gone out of business after its key service provider quit, so I reinstated my membership in Alcor. I had relocated in northern Arizona, so I began visiting the Alcor facility and serving as the photographer in their operating room.

I suggested to Jerry Lemler, the new CEO of Alcor, that I could update some of their printed materials. He told me that there was a much more pressing need, for a new team leader in standby-transport work. When I protested that I had no applicable experience or qualifications, Jerry pointed out that I had already participated in cases and was knowledgeable about the procedures. He then made the clinching argument that I have heard many

times in cryonics: “We really need you to help us, because we don’t have anyone else.”

During the next six months, as Director of Cryopreservation Services, I ran five cases, restocked Alcor’s standby kits, planned a buildout of the facility, repaired Alcor’s relationship with its UK members, purchased a new transport vehicle and planned its conversion, and (most important) revitalized the volunteer network that I regarded as essential. In 2003 I organized the largest training session in Alcor’s history, which lasted for five days and attracted more than 30 people.

One of those people was Aschwin de Wolf.

Suspended Animation

Doing cases for Alcor was extremely stressful. After six months, I was exhausted, I was coming down with persistent virus infections, and my PSA score was up to 11. Evidently, my immune system was not doing well. Saul Kent suggested that if I wanted something easier to do, I could visit Florida to evaluate the situation at Suspended Animation, Inc, a standby-transport organization that had been established by David Hayes and David Shumaker. They had been capitalized with slightly more than \$2 million by Life Extension Foundation in the hope that a for-profit company devoted solely to standby-transport work would achieve better, more consistent results than a full-service cryonics organization that had to divide its time and money among multiple activities.

I visited SA and found it on the brink of collapse. Buildout work had been halted halfway to completion, because the local government in Boca Raton had refused to issue any permits. The company had no legal right to occupy the building, and could be evicted at any time. Animal-rights activists had targeted SA because a single sentence in the company’s business plan mentioned research involving rodents. There was nowhere else for the company to go; when I visited regulatory officers in neighboring communities, I found that all of them were familiar with SA and hostile to the idea of it invading their territory.

Still, I have always enjoyed a challenge. Life Extension Foundation named me as the new general manager of SA. I loaded all my most important possessions on a pickup truck and drove from my home in Arizona, through the eye of hurricane Ivan, and thence to Boca Raton.

Hayes and Shumaker left the company, so my most urgent need was for someone to work with me. I contacted Aschwin de Wolf and paid his air fare to visit me. After a couple of days to familiarize himself with the situation, he remarked thoughtfully, "This is much worse than I had expected."

I waited, feeling extremely anxious.

"I can see I will have to get involved," Aschwin concluded.

During the next two years, we relocated the organization to the neighboring town of Boynton Beach, established a handshake relationship with the mayor, received our permits, went through a \$200,000 renovation-and-buildout, hired new employees, and started designing and fabricating new equipment. Aschwin, meanwhile, proceeded to educate himself in every aspect of cryonics. He spent months reading every possible source, and acquired the more formal medical and biochemical knowledge that I lacked.

Prototyping in Southern California

By the end of a second year in Florida, I had built a prototype of a liquid ventilation device to achieve rapid cooling of the body by infusing chilled perfluorocarbon liquid in the lungs. This device was tested successfully at a lab in California funded by Life Extension Foundation.

I moved to California to continue the development of liquid ventilation. Saul Kent set me up in a dream job for anyone who has ever imagined doing prototype development: I had my own space in an industrial park where I could design and build anything I wanted. I was assisted by Todd Huffman (who later pursued exciting research at his own company, 3Scan) and Piotr Ruc, a master welder whom I had hired at SA. I could design a component in the morning, and Piotr would have it beautifully fabricated in stainless steel by the end of the afternoon.

This was a hugely creative period, and some of the results are described in this book. Only one thing was wrong: I was now living in the greater Los Angeles area. By the end of 2007 I was desperate to get back to my home in Arizona, so Saul Kent agreed that I could continue the liquid ventilation work there. I paid for the construction of a new building with a workshop into which I moved all my equipment. I then designed and built one more iteration of the liquid ventilation system, which is still in use at the time of writing.

No Outcome

Life Extension Foundation had been my patrons for four amazing years, enabling a range of work that I would never have been able to do elsewhere. In the end, though, I realized that I am still a writer by nature. Managing cryonics cases, rescuing a startup business, and prototyping equipment were tasks that I could perform with some success, but I still wanted to write books.

I also saw a more serious problem. I had worked as hard as I could in almost all areas of cryonics, but some of my decisions had been unfortunate (in hiring personnel, especially) and my successes were beginning to seem transient. The standby capability that had been restored at Alcor was already deteriorating. Several of the volunteers who had helped me with great dedication, and had turned difficult cases into successes, had drifted away. Meanwhile, at SA, I no longer felt entirely confident about the future of their standby-transport capability.

The root problem was, and still is, that standby-transport work is expensive, stressful, and unrewarding. Funding it is always a struggle, and the people who do the work tend to become exhausted. Eventually they devote their time to other things.

Also, as my one-time mentor Michael Darwin has mentioned many times, there is no perceived outcome of a cryonics case. A patient who has received prompt intervention, rapid cooling, quick transport, and excellent cryoprotective perfusion ends up immersed in liquid nitrogen alongside a less fortunate person who suffered terrible ischemic injury and could not be perfused at all. And because there is no perceived outcome, we have no easy

way to tell them apart. To some extent this problem is being addressed now by the wonderful development of doing CT scans of cryopreserved neuro patients, but being able to see areas that are ice-free is not the same as feeling confident that those areas can resume their function.

In orthodox medicine, heroic efforts are validated when a patient is rescued from a terrible accident or a terminal condition and becomes healthy again. In cryonics, we lack this positive reinforcement. We are unlikely to know if our work has really been worthwhile until revival is attempted, maybe 100 years or more from now. Consequently, rapid intervention never seems as important as it really is, and maintaining the capability is always a challenge.

Unfinished Business

In 2010, I made my own personal assessment and decided that I had failed in my original goal of raising the perceived odds of revival above 1 in 10,000. This was an entirely subjective evaluation, and other people may have a very different view. But if I couldn't demonstrate to myself that I was making a tangible and permanent difference, I lacked the motivation to continue, especially as a lot of work in cryonics tends to be a taxing experience. In the memorable words of Ben Best, former president of The Cryonics Institute: "Running a cryonics organization is like standing in a rain of hammers."

I returned to my primary occupation, and started writing books about electronics, one of which turned out to be very successful. Being a freelance writer is a notoriously risky occupation, but it is an order of magnitude easier for me than doing cryonics case work.

One piece of unfinished business still remained for me in cryonics. Because all organizations tend to have immediate priorities, the longer-term task of writing standard operating procedures tends to be overlooked, and knowledge tends to be lost. I felt I had acquired a lot of knowledge during my decades in the field. I had also done interviews with most of the important figures (for a book that was never completed). I had participated in more than 20 cases, and generated many designs for equipment. I didn't want this experience to disappear.

My friend Aschwin seemed to feel the same way, and when we expressed an interest in doing something about it, we were encouraged by Alcor director Brian Wowk. Life Extension Foundation decided to underwrite our effort, so Alcor issued a contract for Aschwin and myself to write this book.

This has taken much, much longer than planned, but finally we have done what we set out to do.

Death Is Not Inevitable

In broad, general terms, this book describes how human cryopreservation was done at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. It is not as detailed as a standby-transport manual, but provides an overview which may be helpful to anyone who is interested in participating in cryonics as a full-time or part-time employee, or as a volunteer.

I believe Saul Kent was correct when he told me in 1993 that the key to finding widespread acceptance for cryonics is to improve procedures to the point where their plausibility becomes self-evident. I don't believe this will be achieved in my lifetime, but that doesn't negate the importance of the effort.

I am proud to have been a part of it, because I can think of no activity more meaningful, more ethical, and more necessary. I still feel angry when I think about the idea that was imposed upon me when I was 12 years old, that I should accept the inevitability of death. I may not live to see the ultimate fruition of the efforts expended by my friends and myself in this field, but if we have done even a small amount to promote the idea of cryonics and facilitate its future success, I consider it all worthwhile.

Now I must give thanks to the sometimes difficult but always immensely special people who have given me so much help along the way. In approximately historical sequence, these 41 names mean a lot to me:

Gregory Benford
Michael Darwin
Curtis Henderson

Brenda Peters
Linda Chamberlain
Fred Chamberlain
Brian Wowk
Gregory Fahy
Hugh Hixon
Mike Perry
Courtney Smith
Kevin Brown
Ralph Whelan
Jim Glennie
Cairn Idun
Steve Harris MD
Joan O'Farrell
Sandra Russell
David Pascal
Ben Best
Andy Zawacki
Jim Yount
Paul Wakfer
David Pizer
John Grigg
Alan Sinclair
Michael Riskin
Jerry Lemler
Bobby June
Peter Voss
Joe Waynick
Joe Hovey
Jerry Searcey
Todd Huffman
Todd Soard
David Hayes
David Shumaker

Kelly Kingston

Piotr Ruc

Max More

Steve Graber

But most of all I thank Saul Kent and Bill Faloon. Without their fearlessness, intransigence, and business acumen, cryonics as we know it would not exist.

If some of the people named above are revived in the future, I may not be there. But perhaps this book will be. A writer can ask for nothing more than that.

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