

During Lunch at Medical Center Hour Today

Category: Poems

written by Daniel Becker | May 10, 2013

a developmental biologist shows us a video of a fertilized egg
dividing into two then four then eight cells—
a day's worth of differentiation in a minute—
followed by a slide of a week old blastocyst drawn in cross section
with an outer cell mass or future placenta and an inner cell mass
that's either someone already or destined to be someone
with the same constitutional rights as any non-incarcerated citizen,
and while on the subject of genes as destiny the next clip
shows an unfertilized stem cell donated by a monkey at a lab
where the genetic basis of alcoholism is put to the test:
the stem cell donor sits in the corner of a cage, big smile on her face
since she was randomized to drink as much beer as her genes wanted,
and while that was supposed to be funny
it wasn't as funny as the story of the pope who decreed
that no human eggs could be stored in Italian laboratory freezers,
prompting wily Italian scientists to freeze dry eggs
for room air storage and quick and easy shipment to countries without popes,
but who needs eggs when stem cells on their own can be encouraged to divide
and divide and divide—virgin birth—and keep dividing
through the first trimester at which point all they need to do is grow
until anyone who couldn't do *in vivo* or afford *in vitro* can have kids
which gives popes and Congress something else to think
not very clearly about, and something we don't really want to think about
is the electron micrograph of sperm speckled with HIV-like ants at a picnic—
the price sperm pay for being sheltered from the immune system.
Thanks to enzymes like HIV's reverse transcriptase, the human genome
is at least 5% retroviral—don't even try to parse which is which—
but those days when you don't feel altogether you?
We're all pink on the inside, and stained.

About the poet:

Daniel Becker practices and teaches internal medicine at the University of Virginia, where he also directs the Center for Biomedical Ethics and Humanities and edits [Hospital Drive](#) magazine.

About the poem:

" 'During Lunch at Medical Center Hour Today' is a found poem. I listened to someone talk about the politics, theology and biology of sperm, eggs, fertilized eggs, stem cells, IVF; took notes; sensed a poem stirring; and it more or less delivered itself. (I do have poetic license for this kind of delivery.) About the usual gestation period—first draft in an hour or two; another year or so for revision. Not quite immaculate conception, but who

knows where poems come from?"

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer