

# The Pilgrim Center

A short story by John Frederick Zurn

By the middle of the twenty-second century, the scientists of the nation had finally made real progress solving the conundrum known as death. These dedicated researchers relying on genetics, brain chemistry, and other related sciences had, at last, succeeded in blessing their fellow inhabitants with the gift of a very long life. After centuries of research, the citizenry were now nearly immune to the ravages of time particularly as it related to the brain.

The longevity of the body, however, was different. The inhabitants' physical bodies were still strangely subject to a more rapid decline even though the process of decrepitude appeared to slow down considerably. Although the physical brains of the citizenry were more resilient and could remain capable of functioning effectively for centuries, their bodies were not. This strange enigma in which the body declined while the brain flourished remained a mystery for many years. The government attempted to explain this distinction in basic scientific language, and the people mostly accepted their explanations. In addition, since everyone lived much longer, the government unceasingly drafted five year plans to help allocate the nation's natural resources that were rapidly becoming depleted. However, the greatly desired longevity rate created an environment of good will toward the authorities, so these five year plans met with great support and apparent loyalty. Nonetheless, anyone who suspiciously questioned the wisdom of the state and their plans could be labeled a traitor and required to undergo reeducation and punishment.

The Conrad's were one family that felt conflicted about the government position, especially Grandfather Conrad. Sadly, he, like many others, didn't wish to live an exceedingly long life, because he now remained restricted to a three wheeled conveyance chair. With little mobility, the old man firmly believed life and death shouldn't concern the state and its almighty science.

"I'm old," Grandfather Conrad complained at dinner one night. "My body doesn't work, and I ache all the time. I don't care if the government can keep my brain alive indefinitely. My arms and legs are slowly withering away and soon they will be completely useless.

"But Grandfather," Tommy's inquisitive grandson interrupted. "It's against the law to talk like that. Even suggesting ending your own life is a crime."

"I don't care," Grandfather asserted. "I've seen all I've wanted to see and done everything I've wanted to do."

Finally, Mrs. Conrad, grandfather's daughter-in-law, a tall nervous woman, spoke up, "That's enough, dad. You're living with us now and that's the end of it. Nobody's dying. Don't you realize that if you deliberately die, all the rest of us left behind will be punished? Even if you omit us from your plans, the government will still blame us. We could lose everything."

"All right," Mr. Conrad interjected trying to support his wife. "Let's finish our dinner and visit the park like we agreed. But Dad, please don't say anything that could get us all into trouble."

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The Conrad family had good reason to worry about grandfather Conrad's behavior at the park. The government believed that their scientific achievement regarding prolonged existence had eclipsed all others, yet Grandfather Conrad hadn't felt obligated to praise and promote this longevity policy that stressed the preservation of all human life.

This skepticism had been intensifying over the years as Grandfather's body continued to decline in ways he couldn't control. He couldn't even raise his arms or lift his legs. Worst still, he remained completely dependent on his family for virtually everything he needed including food, medicine and transportation. Without any physical activities to strengthen his body and connect with his friends, he slowly gained weight and became bitter.

Even the way in which old people were identified became a source of frustration and humiliation for Grandfather Conrad. Seniors, labeled as "pilgrims" were lumped into one senior societal group. Since these "pilgrims" needed conveyances to travel anywhere, young citizens called "transportation facilitators" were needed to assist them. This feeling of embarrassment and lack of independence felt especially difficult for Grandfather who had always been active and independent. Now his only defense weapon against his world involved satire and outright hostility.

Yet the most despicable thing Grandfather Conrad was required to endure involved wearing a floppy blue hat and matching uniform with his name in large bold letters printed on his front pockets. Seeing himself as part of a recognizable and pathetic underclass reinforced the label that he had recognized long ago. This whole image of being useless had only increased his desire to escape all the dependency and unwanted pity.

Back at the dinner table, Grandfather Conrad continued with his litany of complaints. "How am I supposed to live when I can hardly move? What good is my brain, if there is nothing I can do with it but think?"

Tommy's father tried to help, "Dad, you have all your data processing programs and holograph displays. Besides, you need to stop thinking of yourself. Why do you think you're so special? All the pilgrims have to rely on their brains. All of us will eventually need help."

Mrs. Conrad felt as if nobody was listening to her. "Grandfather, stop complaining. Do you remember when we took you in? Well, it wasn't a choice. The state didn't even ask us. They simply ordered us to take care of you."

Grandfather took the hint at last. "Fine! I'll be quiet! You won't hear from me for the rest of the day!"

The family silently finished dinner and then Mr. and Mrs. Conrad walked toward the park, while Tommy helped his grandfather maneuver his contrivance. After they had all arrived, Tommy saw his friends from school playing soccer, but when he gazed at his downhearted Grandfather, Tommy decided to stay with him. At that moment Tommy didn't apprehend that his feelings for his grandfather were more than just pity.

In fact, Tommy himself had been entertaining some doubts about the government's authority. He especially disliked the regimentation at school and at home. He also felt suspicious about the extended life idea for all citizens. It seemed as if everyone was required to act in the same way. Being respectful and supportive especially when it involved discussing issues about death, seemed naïve and evasive. Wasn't it true that prisoners could be put to death with molitor pills if they proved to be too wicked? Wasn't it also true that these executions were not actually permissible because of the longevity laws? Tommy suspected the government's longevity conviction with its citizens controlled by punishment and death might be meant to instill fear and facilitate control.

All these ideas contributed to Tommy's growing resolve to help his grandfather. Tommy turned to him at the park and asked, "Grandfather, if you could end your life, how would you do it?"

"I wouldn't do anything," his grandfather asserted. "I'd simply stop taking all the pills and vitamins, that's all."

"Mom wouldn't let you do that," Tommy responded smilingly.

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"Then I'd use my intelligence," Grandfather answered. "Citizens can't make me take pills if they can't find me."

Tommy suddenly came up with an idea to assist Grandfather Conrad. He realized he could kidnap his grandfather and hide him somewhere outside the park boundaries. He looked around to see if anyone was watching, then he walked through the park with his grandfather until his parents disappeared. As the view of the park slowly faded, they continued moving as quickly as possible trying to avoid making any noise. Before long, Tommy and Grandfather Conrad had discovered an unlocked door that led to a vacant factory basement. There they took refuge.

It wasn't long before Mr. and Mrs. Conrad noticed that their pilgrim was missing. Initially, they thought to ask the civil authorities to help them, but then they realized that the couple could be given a scolding, or worse, for losing track of the old man. If they didn't tell anyone, however, and they looked for grandfather themselves, it would be worse if they couldn't locate him. By reporting a missing pilgrim after they had thoroughly hunted for him, the government officials may become even more angry, because they waited so long to report the incident. However, they did feel somewhat reassured because their son, Tommy, was missing as well. They felt certain he would help Grandfather Conrad.

"Do you think Tommy took Grandfather somewhere?" Tommy's mother asked.

"Of course he did," Mr. Conrad said impatiently. "Who else would wheel him anywhere?"

"One thing is certain," Mrs. Conrad complained. "We need to find them, so grandfather can take his medicine."

Meanwhile, Grandfather Conrad and his grandson slowly comprehended the urgency of their situation. "I don't think I thought this kidnapping idea all the way through," Tommy apologized. "We can't just leave on our own like this."

But Grandfather Conrad felt more at ease. "Don't worry, Tommy. I'm not going to ask my grandson to get arrested for me. If you simply leave me here, nobody will know what happened."

"I'll know!" Tommy objected. "I want you to be happy, grandfather, and I'm not leaving you!"

Grandfather Conrad at last apprehended the danger of their situation and all the innocent people involved. "Tommy, take me back. We'll say I wanted to investigate the new streets of the city."

"No," Tommy pleaded. "You're very unhappy, and you'll either run away or end your life."

"All right. All right," Grandfather Conrad relented. "I'll go with you and even enroll in counseling. Now, let's find your parents before the government ghouls discover we're missing."

Having persuaded his grandfather to cooperate, Tommy quickly pushed him back to the park where Mr. and Mrs. Conrad were searching for them.

By then, Mrs. Conrad couldn't conceal her disappointment, "Grandfather I cannot take responsibility for you any longer. Your political comments and sarcastic outbursts together with your disappearance today have left us all nervous and frightened. We need to resettle you with another family."

Before his daughter-in-law could continue her condemnation, Grandfather Conrad interrupted her. "I know and I agree. I've been a very selfish and resentful person, but Tommy and I talked things over. I'm going to see a government counselor at the Pilgrim Center and get some help. Tommy even agreed to take me."

"Thank goodness!" Mr. Conrad sighed with relief. "Now maybe we can have some peace around here. Are you sure, Tommy, that you're willing to be grandfather's transportation facilitator every day, maybe for months?"

"Yes," Tommy agreed enthusiastically. "I've never been to Pilgrim Center. It could be very interesting!"

Early the very next morning, Grandfather Conrad and Tommy arrived at the Pilgrim Center just as it was opening. They both expected that Grandfather Conrad would be welcomed with

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respect and enthusiasm, however, the administrator at the desk seemed aloof and even unkind. "What do you want?" The surly man wanted to know.

At this point, Grandfather Conrad looked ready to leave, but Tommy intervened. "We are here to enroll in one of your tutorial classes with an individual group facilitator."

"Not possible," the man retorted. "We only allow groups and group facilitators here."

"Fine," Grandfather Conrad answered evenly, remembering his promise to Tommy. "So what kind of groups do you have?"

"We have two groups, one for whiners like you, and another more advanced class for pilgrims who want to know the truth."

"I'm no whiner," Grandfather Conrad snapped. "I want to be in the advanced group."

The administrator appeared to consider the situation carefully, and then with a glint in his eye replied, "All right. You can join the advanced group. However, if you start complaining, we'll demote you to the lower one."

Since Grandfather Conrad didn't like the administrator, he hadn't noticed the administrator's sudden warm expression. He still felt suspicious about the class itself, but he also especially felt curious about "the truth" and what it could mean. Nevertheless, with his promise to Tommy weighing on his mind, Grandfather Conrad signed up for the advanced group.

When Tommy attempted to stay behind with his grandfather, his grandfather softly whispered, "Tommy, go home now, and pick me up this afternoon. I'll be fine."

Almost immediately, Tommy left the Pilgrim Center and walked toward his school leaving Grandfather Conrad alone. Before long, however, several other pilgrims approached Grandfather Conrad and guided him to the advanced group room. After everyone introduced themselves, they all sat down.

When everyone was in his place, Grandfather Conrad felt surprised to observe so many other pilgrims in the room. In fact, when he was invited to describe his reasons for entering the group, he realized that many others seemed to be in the same predicament as he was. When he noticed the other pilgrims weren't complaining when they shared, he dropped his sarcastic remarks almost before he began making them.

Finally, one of the facilitators interrupted the whole class. "No more discussion about your problems at home and difficulties with the government. All of you need to comprehend the truth about our nation. Now listen carefully, and learn everything you can today, and please remember this knowledge must be kept absolutely secret. If you report this information to anybody else, you could be punished severely."

Everyone agreed to remain silent about what they were going to learn even though they didn't know anything about it. Grandfather Conrad spoke seriously when he replied, "I understand. Now what do you think we should know?"

The group facilitator shifted toward the front wall and switched on a huge 3D projector. As the holograph began to project images on the wall, there appeared a brutal portrayal of the history of the nation. To the astonishment of the group, millions of soldiers could be seen battling on opposing sides. During this long-drawn-out war, individual soldiers fell, yet every time they were injured; they would get up almost immediately, and return to the battle. This miraculous behavior repeated itself everywhere on the battlefield, and it appeared that the war would never end.

In a later segment of the same holograph, citizens and political leaders could be seen robbing, assaulting, and even murdering what appeared to be innocent neighbors. These criminals seemed to be fearless and merciless as well. This scene projected on the 3D film also appeared to cover long periods of time.

When the thirty minute presentation ended, Grandfather Conrad and the rest of the pilgrims looked stunned and disbelieving. However, no one in the group could be exactly sure about what they'd just seen, so the facilitator tried to explain. "What you have just witnessed is the chronicle of our race."

The pilgrims then attempted to interrupt, but the facilitator raised his hand and continued,

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"Many centuries ago our nation achieved both physical and mental extended longevity. The research hadn't failed as you have probably heard from the government. Instead, the ability to maintain our bodies indefinitely, led to the complete abandonment of humility and compassion. For example, since citizens could live almost forever, they had no moral compass and accepted no consequences for their actions. While believing themselves to be almost immortal, they also assumed they were more entitled than all others. Their arrogance assumed that no opposing army could conquer them, so wars became inevitable. In this way, prolonged longevity led only to chaos and violence."

"Worse yet, after a while the lives of individuals became tedious and dishonest, so they eventually began to delight in evil, hoping to find purpose and exhilaration by hurting and dominating others. So as you can see, the notion of prolonged longevity became warped because it created much hardship and moral decline.

So the government's present explanation about prolonged existence is based on a lie that the scientists fabricated. They could still create prolonged life, but they decided not to continue the effort. Instead, the researchers agreed that physical longevity shouldn't be sustained and allowed the concept of an extended life of the brain as a substitute. In this way, it is hoped that citizens will develop their minds in more compassionate and productive ways instead of misusing physical longevity as others have done in the distant past. You pilgrims are all trapped in your three wheeled conveyances because our ancestors couldn't be trusted. Nevertheless, your limitations do allow you to develop your consciousness while avoiding the temptation of physical perfection."

After the facilitator finished speaking, the pilgrims remained silent and looked embarrassed. Grandfather Conrad finally found the words to explain how they were all feeling. Although his remarks were naïve, they did resonate with the others. "The government hasn't been out to simply control us; they need to protect all of society. Perhaps our complaints are nobody's fault but are based mostly on the simple inevitability of old age."

Back at home, Mr. and Mrs. Conrad observed a positive change in Grandfather and decided to allow him to go to the Pilgrim Center as much as he wished. They felt so happy that Grandfather had found some kind of peace concerning his circumstances, and they felt grateful.

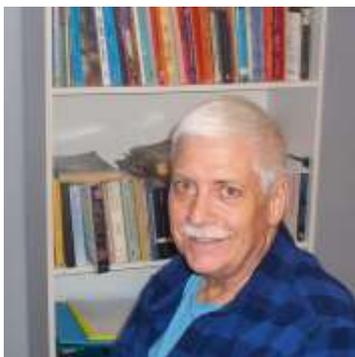
A couple of weeks later at the Pilgrim Center, Grandfather Conrad decided to reveal his great secret to Tommy. Since Tommy had been the most concerned about him, Grandfather felt it important to explain his improved attitude. Just before Tommy dropped him off, they stopped at a bench in the park, and Tommy sat down.

"Tommy," Grandfather Conrad began. "The history of our civilization is not what you think it is. It's a great secret, but I still want you to know about it."

Tommy was both serious and whimsical. "Okay, Grandfather. Just as long as you don't complain about your health!"

"I won't," Grandfather Conrad replied with a smile. "I've learned my lesson."

### About the Author...



**John Frederic Zurn** earned an M.A. in English from Western Illinois University and spent much of his career as a school teacher. John has also worked at several developmental training centers, teaching employment readiness skills to mentally challenged teenagers and adults. Now retired, he continues writing and publishing poems and stories. As one of seven children, his experiences growing up continue to help inspire his art and influence his life.