'And One Last Thing . .'; Digital immortality is an app that probably wouldn't have interested Steve Jobs.

Author: Jenkins, Holman W; Jr.

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Abstract: Jobs reflected at length on the undesirability of death from the individual point of view, and the usefulness of it from nature's point of view.

Full text: Steve Jobs was a private man who died in public. In latter years, he took the stage at Apple events knowing that, at least at first, the audience's focus would be on him and the toll his disease had taken on his vibrant persona. Unlike a lot of CEOs, he seldom took to a stage for any other reason than to talk about Apple products, such as to declaim that the rich should pay more taxes. Bizarrely, he was even chided for not conforming, in the apologetic fashion of the truly rich, to the demand that he be seen conspicuously doing good works with his wealth--as if the work he was already doing was not a good use of his time. When he presented himself to the public, it was to offer instruction on only two subjects. One was Apple, and the other, in a famous address to graduating students at Stanford, was death.

Jobs reflected at length on the undesirability of death from the individual point of view, and the usefulness of it from nature's point of view. He offered no comfort. He was not Thomas Buddenbrook, nonhero of Thomas Mann's novel, who briefly glimpses a kind of peace in thinking that the stuff of which he is made will return to the universe from which he borrowed it. And even that arid peace promptly departs, never to return, and he dies regretting that he had to die, just as most of us will.

Jobs made it clear that he did not welcome death, but also that life could be more interesting knowing that death would be coming.

One wonders, then, with what mixed feelings he viewed his Silicon Valley compatriots who've been seeking ways to make sure, at least for themselves, death never comes. No doubt they are being perfectly reasonable. When wealthy enough to satisfy every material appetite many times over, it make sense to try to prolong those appetites indefinitely through cryogenics, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence.

This would not have been Jobs's interest in the subject. He likely would have been more intrigued by the specific claim, advanced by inventor Ray Kurzweil and other advocates of "technological singularity," that soon our individualities will be able to live eternally through digital electronics.

What kind of device should our consciousness occupy? Should it have a 4-inch screen or a 9-inch screen? Should it fit in a pocket or backpack? Should it have Bluetooth? Where should our essence primarily reside, in the cloud or in device memory? How much battery life would the user want?

And who is the user?

Hmmm. Jobs looked at technology from the perspective of the user, who wanted an object both beautiful and beautifully functional. If the user is our "survivors"--i.e., our loved ones who still exist in physical form--he might conclude that the most important feature such a device could have is an off-switch--a permanent one.

Indeed, he might conclude that the whole flaw in the Kurzweil vision is that anybody anywhere would have any lasting use for us, that our sticking around in digital form would be welcome or valuable in any way.

He might conclude that such a device should have a battery that lasts, oh, about a month, and then goes permanently dead. He might conclude that our essence should not be inscribed on a hard drive or a thumb drive--but in D-RAM memory, the kind that vanishes forever when the power is shut off.

Such a device would let our friends and relations prolong their goodbyes for a few weeks while also avoiding the subsequent guilt when days, weeks and soon years go by without any urge to revisit their electronically immortal but increasingly irrelevant loved one. Such a device wouldn't cure death or materially delay death. It would make death better. Create a month or so of pure communion with the loved one, via a sumptuous screen and high-fidelity headset, untroubled by medical decisions and interventions, free of pain--but also free of the more pleasant forms of physical urgency.

Such a device would offer more comfort, perhaps, to the survivor than to the departed, for whom artificial immortality in any form--whether it's leaving behind an autobiography or monument or foundation--invariably proves a poor substitute for not dying. Electronic immortality would likely prove no less so. Death would still demand that its purpose be served, clearing the way for life to continue, leaving the past behind, where it belongs.

Steve Jobs, who was special, was not of the idea that anyone is special. But leave it to Apple. The iCrypt, whatever form it takes, would undoubtedly be done with the taste, attention to detail, and understanding of the customer that he and his colleagues brought to everything they did.

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