

My Digital Cemetery

By ROB WALKER JULY 17, 2015

SAVANNAH, GA. — My digital address book lists 2,743 contacts. This is not because I'm popular or extroverted; I'm neither. It's because this collection of names stretches back two decades, the oldest contacts tracing to a 1996 Palm Pilot and preserved through transfers involving more devices than I care to remember. It covers life in four cities and work on countless reporting projects. The idea of organizing and pruning this slow-motion data dump is by now unthinkable.

One result is that when I start to tap in the name of someone I'm looking for, I often turn up several others as well. Maybe an expert source on a subject I'll never write about again. Or the best plumber in a place where I no longer live. Possibly a former colleague I have since learned actively dislikes me. Probably at least one name I just can't place. And, perhaps, someone who is dead.

I might take that moment to delete one or more of these entries. But not the ones for the deceased. Those I keep.

I seldom talk about this habit, because I assume it sounds weird. But recently I was intrigued to read about [an incident](#) described in "Becoming Steve Jobs," the new book by Brent Schlender and Rick Tetzeli. A couple of years after Mr. Jobs died, the anecdote goes, John Lasseter, a founder of Pixar and a close friend of Mr. Jobs's, showed Tim Cook, the chief executive of Apple, the "favorites" list on his iPhone contacts app. It still included Mr. Jobs. "I'll never be able to take that out," he said. Mr. Cook responded by pulling out his phone, which also included Mr. Jobs's contact entry.

I'm not sure if this says something unusual about Mr. Jobs, or Mr. Cook and Mr. Lasseter. But to me it suggests something more universal. However our tools are designed, human behavior determines how we really use them. So while there may not be anything logical about hanging on to the contact details of the departed, Mr. Lasseter's comment makes perfect sense. And maybe that makes me feel (a little) less weird for thinking that my contacts list has accidentally acquired an involuntary-memories feature, a memento mori functionality.

Digital technology has already had notable effects on the ways we mourn, remember the dead, and even [think about the afterlife](#). This has mostly come to our attention as a side effect of the broader tech-driven redefinition of social and public life: a personal blog becomes a kind of a monument to be preserved, a social-media profile becomes a site of communal grieving. To some extent, digital services have adjusted to this development: Facebook accounts, for example, can be "[memorialized](#)," a setting that allows friends to share remembrances, but stops posting upsetting birthday reminders.

In those public contexts, maintaining a digital connection to the dead seems normal. Unfriending the deceased in full view of your Facebook social circle, for example, might look (or feel) callous. Whatever the reason, we seem to prefer keeping these symbolic ties intact whether they are deeply personal or otherwise. Almost a year after his suicide, Robin Williams's Twitter profile lists nearly 1.5 million followers.

In contrast, an address book or contacts app is a distinctly *un*public setting. Even in our "share"-crazy era, this collection of names and coordinates is not a thing to be broadcast and commented upon. Mr. Lasseter's showing Mr. Cook his contacts might be the most unusual aspect of that story. Certainly nobody looks at my address book but me. Which entries I choose to delete or preserve is a purely personal matter.

And yes, of course, random reminders of those who have passed away can be jarring. I'm 46, an age that's hard to reach without losing friends and former colleagues who died well before their time. In some cases, the circumstances were a shock, not just unexpected but unnerving, and unfair. Two were suicides, and one of those was a woman I'd been quite close to in my 20s. You might assume I wouldn't enjoy being reminded of tragedy, and you'd be right.

BUT for starters, as anyone who has been to a funeral knows, to contemplate any death is also to remember a life, and how it intertwined with and influenced one's own. I was sad to learn that the writer William Zinsser passed away in May at age 92. But what a life! I worked with him as a young editor years ago, and kept in casual touch for a while afterward: I went to see him play piano, we corresponded about sheet music, that sort of thing. He was a master of the craft, as you'd expect from the author of "On Writing Well," but what sticks with me is how profoundly kind and generous he was to such a minor acquaintance. He was an example of how to be; any prompt to remember him, I'll take.

Less sentimentally, there's Gore Vidal. As a longtime fan, I lament his absence. His entry in my address book, however, consists of a fax number in Italy that worked in 1999. I know it worked because I used it to try to persuade him to write an essay for *The New York Times Magazine*, where I was then an editor. His response came in a 3 a.m. message on my home answering machine, dismissing the idea, my employer and me. Colorfully. Clearly there's no sensible reason to save this contact, but whenever I stumble upon it I know: I'll never be able to take that out.

I've picked a couple of familiar names to make a point that applies to the many contacts in my address book that you would not recognize. Each brings to mind memories that I welcome, even those who died far too young. And while I'm publicly skeptical of the theory that digital technology usefully allows us to offload our memories, I secretly worry that it's true enough to make deleting contacts feel a bit like shredding pages of a diary, or even zapping cells from my brain.

Or maybe something even more troubling: The convenient-by-design act of deleting the name of a dead friend with a simple tap or click can feel like overtly participating in removing that person from the world.

Not long after I read that Steve Jobs anecdote, Grantland posted [a short video](#) in which Gay Talese thumbed through, and discussed, his address book. Of course it's not digital (in fact, it's leather bound), but it dates back more than 50 years, and its pages are a gorgeous jumble of handwriting, cross-outs and even paper scraps of new information taped over old entries. The author reads out some celebrated names from this de facto record of personal encounters and professional curiosity. Some, naturally, are dead. "I make a point of not erasing names, as a rule," he remarks. "I don't think that it's ethical to erase the past."

My address book lacks the aesthetic charisma of Mr. Talese's analog object, just as any given Pinterest board is less fascinating and visually distinct than your grandmother's adolescent scrapbook. Contacts software is designed for efficiency and ease of use, not emotional evocation or stealth autobiography. But Mr. Talese's point holds true for my digital object anyway: "Those people listed in that book have next to nothing in common with any other person in that book," he observes, "except through me." For this reason, among others: "That book is a connection to my whole life." Mr. Talese has lived a singular life. But then again, haven't we all? And while for someone my age the urge to preserve a digital address book is tied to memories of physical reference points for personal objects (a clothbound volume, ink on paper), a young person today is collecting what could be a contact list that will reach back to childhood. It seems to me that even a simple ledger of everyone you've ever known is actually an amazing thing, whether anybody gets around to filming you scrolling through it or not.

I can understand why a reminder of a particular death may be painful enough to remove it from a place where it might pop up unexpectedly. As a practical matter, my habit means that any workaday search for the local electrician's phone number, or whatever, can inadvertently spark a melancholy pang. And just as I have at least some happy associations with even the most heartbreaking losses, every instance of remembrance carries sadness. As fondly as I remember Bill Zinsser, seeing his name will always make me regret not staying in better touch for longer than I did. Other names remind me of things I wish I'd said, or things I wish I hadn't.

This means that to erase those names would feel like an attempt not just to erase these people, but to erase some part of myself. Perhaps these reminders will in some way make me do a better job with all those other contacts, over the course of whatever life we have left. Even if that proves to be wishful thinking, I'd rather live with these entries than make them disappear. What Steve Job's former colleagues have decided to carry is in some sense a trace of his life. To me, that sounds like something worth keeping. What I've lost is part of who I am. So is what I choose to save.

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