

Gone but Not Deleted

When loved ones die, what do we do with the digital reminders they've left behind?

By [Luke O'Neil](#). (from Boston Magazine + Saturday Evening Post)

I don't remember the final conversation I had with my father. Toward the end of his life, he was hard to understand on the phone, as years of substance abuse and failing health had garbled his voice. He'd call at inopportune times—from a rehab center or hospital on the Cape, or the home of a friend in Florida he had somehow charmed his way into—and I'd hurry to get off the phone. Sometimes I'd find myself annoyed by his attempts to reconnect and let the call go to voicemail. It had been more than 15 years since we'd had anything resembling a normal relationship, and more than 30 since he and my mother had. Even in my frustration, though, it was hard not to think of his looming existential deadline. *I may never get the chance to talk to him again*, I'd say to myself. I always did. Until, of course, I didn't.

On good days, he'd tell me about his latest living situation, calling from a flip phone with a number that changed as frequently as a drug dealer's. He'd ask about my writing and where I'd traveled to lately, seemingly in awe of all the opportunities I had that he didn't; even approaching 40, I'd revert to the role of a young boy eager to make his father proud, despite having received plenty of love from my mother and stepdad. He'd lobby me to put in a good word with my sisters on his behalf, a message I would relay. *Just call the old bastard back*, I'd tell them. *You'll regret it someday if you don't*.

I do, however, remember the exact day and time of our final few text exchanges, because they're still on my phone, where, for at least as long as the cloud exists and I stay current on my bill, they'll live forever. There's a photo I sent him from December 2015, just after I'd had a chance to interview Tom Brady. What Massachusetts dad wouldn't want to see that? It kind of breaks my heart to read his reply again now: "I'm so proud of u my son i can't wait to show everyone tomorrow I can't express my joy dad go get the big fish son AGAIN I'M TO PROUD FOR WORDS LOVE YOU DAD."

Reading other texts from around that time makes me laugh: "I feel like such lo gool o gohurrf horp," he wrote. ".,ro jlpw up pi f." I still have no idea what he was talking about. And then in February 2016, the last message I'd ever receive: "hello my son how you doing today i have been in the hospital for two weeks now but I'm getting better TALK TO you Soon love Dad." Three months later, he died of sepsis.

I was thinking about those texts during a family dinner at my mother's, not long after my father's death. Someone had asked about a wall of photos that functions as an ad hoc memorial to assorted ancestors on my mother's and stepfather's sides, all mustachioed, bonneted, and stoic. *The Wall of the Dead*, we joked. But it occurred to me that the pictures are different from my father's text messages—as are the letters I have stashed away from my beloved grandmother, stuffed with newspaper clippings she thought I'd like and uncashed \$5 checks for "pizza." My wife just found one in which my grandmother tried to persuade her to get me to give up on writing and find a real job. Those artifacts are moments frozen in time, part of my distant past.

Our phones, on the other hand, are tools we live with every day. I could respond to my dead father's final text right now, adding to the running conversation. Our devices are where we carry out the business of living our lives and are increasingly our primary means of communicating with the people

in them. Should they also be where we lug around our memories of the deceased? More to the point, do the digital ghosts the dead leave behind make it harder to let them go at all?

The idea that the dead can speak to us feels like something from a horror or sci-fi movie. Yet the reverse, talking to them from the here and now, whether through prayer, quiet reflection, or even speaking out loud—*You'd love this, wouldn't you, Ma?*—doesn't seem strange at all. Keeping our loved ones stored in our smartphones, often not deleting their contacts for a long time after they're gone, has made this even easier to do. We ask our devices for directions home, to bring us food, to broadcast our entire selves to the world. Now they're also boxes we carry around that store our conversations with ghosts.

Megan Summers, a longtime Boston resident now working for Facebook in New York, is the perfect example. She told me she has voicemails from two deceased friends that she can't listen to now, but she needs to know they're with her just in case. "It's almost as though I am saving them for the future," she says. "They just really need to be in the world to me. If I lost them, I'd be devastated."

Shortly before Selene Angier, a copywriter from Cambridge, lost her mother, she received a voice message of her mom singing "Happy Birthday." It was before she knew how bad her mother's cancer was, and now, three years later, the song serves as a time capsule of happier days. Angier listens to the recording on her cell on her birthday every year. She's even backed it up, just in case she loses the phone or something unexpected happens. "I cherish that voicemail, and a few other random ones I have not deleted yet, even the super-boring stuff like 'I'm running late, be there soon!'" she says. "It's a great comfort to still hear her voice, more so on the day she brought me into this world." When we spoke, Angier's father was dying of cancer and she was preparing his digital memorial, saving everything. "On my birthday," she says, "I asked him to leave me a voicemail singing 'Happy Birthday' to me, so I'd have his, too. He mistimed the recording, and all that's there is '...to you!' followed by a minute of silence." He's since passed away.

Lindsay Mace, an administrative assistant for adults with disabilities who lives in Kingston, lost a close friend in 2011 and saved his contact in her phone for four years. For the first year and a half, she regularly dialed the number, telling me that "the saddest part was calling and not hearing his voicemail anymore but a disconnected line. I left one message for him after he passed. I just wanted to hear his voice and get some reassurance he wasn't really gone." Calling was a means of staving off some of the more overwhelming emotions, she says, things she couldn't deal with all at once: "I finally erased it because I felt it was time. Long after the number had been shut off. Sort of like, *I don't need this anymore*. I feel like I know he's still here."

Texts and voicemails are just two of the ways in today's digital world that we can stay connected to those who've passed away. But when it comes to online memories, cherished or not, they're hardly the only ones.

By some estimates, 8,000 to 10,000 Facebook users die every day. What survives is a trove of digital footprints, including posts, messages, and pictures. So where does it all go? Turns out you can name an account executor, presumably a close friend or family member, to come in and tidy up your social

media belongings in the event of your death, although that person will not be given access to your private chat logs. Immediate family members can also select the option to memorialize the account, turning off certain features, such as birthday reminders, which many users report are exceptionally painful to see.

Gmail, meanwhile, has a tool called the Inactive Account Manager that lets you tell Google what to do with your account after you have stopped using it for a certain amount of time. Before the deadline, Google will reach out to see if you're still there, checking your digital vital signs. If you don't respond, it will contact your preselected trusted contacts with a message you've written. "Hey man I'm dead lol. Don't look at my nudes, please," or something to that effect. And Twitter has the option to remove the account of a deceased family member, but only if you submit official proof of death—not exactly a breezy ask when you're grieving.

Which brings me to my next point: As technology advances, it promises to change the very nature of how we mourn our loved ones. In *Wired* last year, for instance, writer James Vlahos documented his final few months with his father, during which he tried to capture the idiosyncrasies of his dad's voice and upload it into an artificial intelligence chat software he called the Dadbot. It was an attempt to effect a sort of immortality—a concept many are working on around the world, and one sure to be improved upon. One company recently made headlines by promising to preserve your brain and upload it to the cloud—a cool idea, except they had to kill you to do it.

For the forward thinkers among us, there are options to plan our communiqués from the other side. Moran Zur, the founder of a service called SafeBeyond, explained to me that his "emotional life insurance policy" was inspired by the deaths of his wife and his father. His wife had been suffering from cancer for years, and he wanted her to leave behind messages for their children that they could receive at various milestones in their lives as they got older. "These are future conversations they will never have the chance to have, but now even if it's going to be one-sided, she's recorded them for them in advance," he said. "It's not just leaving money behind; it's leaving words of wisdom, being there for them at significant moments of their life."

Being able to hear from their mother will likely be a salve to their children, but it's worth asking: How can we ever move on in this brave new digital era if the dead are never truly gone?

It's been a couple of months now since I first reopened the texts from my father, and I've been looking at them again, swimming in the absurd melancholy of it. I could do the same with others who've died, but it would take an extra step, rummaging around in old photo albums and digging through letter boxes in the back of the closet. Now, in the time it takes to look up a movie schedule or restaurant menu, I can call up the history of my relationship with my dad.

Right now, we don't know much about the impact of our devices on mourning—at least not academically. There just haven't been many studies of it, says Elsa Ronningstam, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and clinical psychologist at McLean Hospital. I suspect that when it is studied, we'll find that phones have vastly complicated, and perhaps even forestalled, our ability to grieve in a natural fashion.

Our digital mourning isn't nearly as separated from our everyday lives as the experience of visiting a graveyard or holding a physical letter or photo. Such a ritual "is an act that has space and takes its time," Ronningstam says. "That has been part of our human lives for many, many years." The ease with which we can access memories of lost loved ones on our phones or social media accounts, on the other hand, may end up trapping us in our grief. "Say you're in a romance, and the romance breaks up and you've got that person's voice on your telephone," says Donnah Canavan, an associate professor of psychology at Boston College. "I think to the extent that you use listening to the person's voice to keep you connected to that relationship, it's bad for you."

Still, allowing yourself to remember is part of the mourning process, says Michael Grodin, a professor of psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine who works with trauma patients from around the world. "You can't get rid of the memories, but you don't want to constantly be in the moment." In his estimation, there's nothing abnormal or unhealthy about returning to digital artifacts; it's no different from cherishing an old blanket or wearing a loved one's T-shirt. It's just a matter of monitoring the extent of it. "If it's interfering with relationships, everyday functioning, your ability to work and carry on with life, then it's worth seeking professional help," Grodin says.

Even after all of these interviews and the hours I've spent thinking about my father's texts, it's not entirely clear what they mean to me, or if they even mean anything at all. Contending with the digital endpoint of a relationship with a person who was a constant and loving part of your life for a long time is a lot different from when it is a reminder of someone who was absent. I can no longer call my father on the phone, but that was true for most of my life anyway. Perhaps I should have done so more often. Perhaps he should have. Every text I have now is a glaring reminder that neither of us bothered to. I feel guilty about that. In part that's because he had the foresight to die before my loving stepfather, hogging all of my good "my dad died" writing before the man who actually raised me could get the chance. I wonder if he was capable of thinking about any of this stuff in the last week or two he spent in a medically induced coma at the hospital as his children and exes reemerged to say goodbye one final time. It was like a dress rehearsal. We were talking to him, but he couldn't talk back. I guess I'm doing the same thing now.

Although we still cannot speak directly to the dead, these days they can call back out to us. And what they say, whether it's in a voicemail, a text, or a tweet, is the most important message any of us will ever be able to convey: I was here. I am gone now, but I was here.

I just went back and looked at one of my last text messages to my father, sent shortly before he stopped responding. "Hi dad was planning on calling soon," I wrote. "Glad to hear you're well." I wonder how long he saved that one from me? Probably right up until the end.

*Editor's Note: Some of the text in this story appears to be misspelled. They are not. This is precisely how the author wrote it. Verified via two different publications.