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Telepresence and Death and Bereavement

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“The living have often relied on technology – defined broadly as “a machine, device or other application of human industrial arts...include[ing] traditional and emerging electronic media...and traditional arts such as painting and sculpture” (ISPR, 2000) – to help them attain some sense of physical and social presence or connection with the departed. (Lombard, Selverian)

Professor Lombard’s definition of Telepresence is “not a technology but an experience evoked by a technology.” The way people are dealing with death and bereavement has changed since the digital age. It used to be that people would learn that someone died through phone calls

and obituaries in newspapers. “Death used to be the final disconnect from the mortal world, but that’s not quite the case anymore.” (Carroll) Today, most people are notified about a death through social media just as they are keeping their memories alive through the same technology.

Facebook was created to connect one living being with another. According to the January 16, 2013 article by Jaweed Kaleem, “Death on Facebook Now Common as “Dead Profiles” Create Vast Virtual Cemetery” states “Facebook has become the world’s largest site of memorials for the dead.” Artists Milo Reinhardt and Conan Lai project entitled, mass.rip, produced a Facebook “monument”: a granite tombstone, engraved with the projection-mapped names of deceased Facebook users. Facebook has clear guidelines on how to gain access and delete a person’s Facebook page. But many people are deciding to keep the page up to remember them by. Friends and family can write on the person’s wall as though they were still alive. This may be cathartic to some but others don’t like the constant reminder. Facebook spokesperson Fred Wolens reports “that when they receive a report that a person on Facebook is deceased, they put the account in a special memorialized state. Certain sensitive information is removed and privacy is restricted to friends.” (Kaleem) Friends and family can still write on their wall in remembrance. At the request of a close family member the profile can be removed entirely.

Twitter has a social app to connect with people after your die. Twitter’s LivesOn app “independently uses intricate knowledge of a person’s on-line character to create a virtual continuation of their personality after death. The growth of digital legacies is already throwing up legal and ethical issues due to its violation of many of the websites terms of service for surviving relatives to continue to use their passwords.” (P.T. India)

Some families leave cell phones active so they can still leave a message for their loved one or just listen to their voice after they are gone. “The marking of the location that a person has been buried is another way to evoke the presence of the person and our memories of them.” (Lombard, Selverian) Manufacturers are putting chips into headstones. Visitors with a smartphone “can visit a virtual memorial web page so that they can learn more about the deceased. Technology, once considered irreverent is now a welcome component of the grieving process.” (Carroll) Modern technology is playing a bigger part in remembering the deceased. “Gravesite devices play recordings of the deceased stored on a computer. Memory Medallions, a digital memory device are embedded in a monument, memorial, or grave marker and contain a digital memory device that holds a photograph and life story of your loved one.” A series of

technologies are now available or emerging to let individuals recreate their own or someone else's presence in a form that could remain after death. (Lombard, Selverian)

“Technology does not need to be sophisticated to evoke presence but there are new and emerging technologies available now that enhance our ability to evoke the departed in ways that are physically, socially, and psychologically vivid and real.” (Lombard, Selverian) But does this technology inhibit people to grieve naturally.

Death is a mysterious phenomenon, that people are either drawn to or, no pun intended, deathly afraid of. When someone passes away the living tries to preserve the deceased's life after death. Graves, memorials or even planting a tree or flower can be done to honor them. For example a family friend dedicated a tree to my grandmother after she passed away earlier this year. “The development of a bond is conscious, dynamic, and changing. ... Many believe the deceased are there to intervene and support them. ... Children and adolescents ... build a new relationship with the deceased by talking to the deceased, locating the deceased (usually in heaven), experiencing the deceased in their dreams, visiting the grave, feeling the presence of the deceased, and by participating in mourning rituals.... Adults also find themselves dreaming, talking to, and feeling the presence of the deceased” (Constructing a Bond, 1996).

Technology is a way people are able to feel connected to their loved ones who have passed away. For many people it is great and it helps with coping with their loss. However for some it can be destructive during their time of grieving. Teresa Lee (2014), who lost her sister, writes “technology has simplified and connected our lives in more ways than I know, but there is nothing to help with the immense grief you feel after someone dies. There is nothing that fills the hole in your heart. Only when someone so big and important is gone, do you realize how absolutely futile all this technology actually is”. In her case, she was bombarded by texts, calls, and Facebook messages. All she wanted to do was detach herself from the situation and grieve in private. So in contrast to the statement above about connecting with the deceased, in the twentieth century the view prevailed that successful mourning required the bereaved to emotionally detach themselves from the deceased. (Kastenbaum, 2006a, *Continuing Bonds, Detachment Revisited*).

Technology has created some amazing ways to hear and see people who have passed on. One way this has happened is through holograms. Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson, for example, have put on amazing performances through holograms. Holograms are great but what if

we could have our loved ones come back as robots? Would that be exciting or unnerving? In season 2 of the show *Black Mirror*, there is an episode called “Be Right Back”. It follows the story of a woman named Martha, whose boyfriend (Ash), dies unexpectedly. A friend tells her about a service where she can communicate with Ash through text messages and phone calls. It then leads to her ordering a robot that looks and acts exactly like Ash. Martha is excited to have him in her life again.

Ash’s double is a magical thing—it exists to obey and pay attention to Martha, do its best to replicate what it knows of Ash’s personality, and service her needs in any way possible, which extends to sex (programmed with pornographic information, he’s a far better lover than the real Ash). But while the voice on the phone was warm and helpful and infinitely understanding, robot-Ash is like a lost puppy, following Martha around wherever she goes, following her every request to the letter (he won’t sleep with his eyes closed unless you tell him to). (Sims, 2014). However, she soon realizes that nothing, not even this robot can replace Ash. The robot just does whatever Martha wants, however in real life Ash would have been stubborn and fought back. After watching this episode, we can now understand how Theresa felt when she said nothing can fill the void of your loved one. Not even a robotic replica of them.

You would think that after watching this show one would not try and create a bot their self. However, some people need to have a close connection with their loved ones after they die. So Eugenia Kuyda made a memorial bot for her friend Roman who passed away. It was a way to help her cope and let her friends’ memory live on. Some people, including Kuyda were uncertain about it. However, Kuyda had spent that time gathering up his old text messages, setting aside the ones that felt too personal, and feeding the rest into a neural network built by developers at her artificial intelligence startup. She had struggled with whether she was doing the right thing by bringing him back this way. At times it had even given her nightmares. But ever since Mazurenko’s death, Kuyda had wanted one more chance to speak with him. (Newton, 2016).

After doing research on this topic, we can assume that how people handle death depends the person who’s grieving. For Theresa, she needed to escape memories to grieve. Looking at memories of her sister caused her greater pain rather than relief. Eugenia Kuyda, had to drawn closer to the memories. Kuyda found herself rereading the endless text messages her friend had sent her over the years-----His body had been cremated, leaving her no grave to visit. Texts and photos were nearly all that was left of him. (Newton, 2016).