

Dialogues with the Digital Dead

"I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel." (The Creature, in *Frankenstein*)¹

If you could summon a computer generated, holographic, speaking image of a beloved deceased person to sit beside you and have a talk, would you? Would you do it more than once? Perhaps every day?

For thousands of years, people have engaged in imaginative ways to bridge the space between the dead and the living. Many talk to the deceased—silently in prayers or aloud while walking or driving. We launch notes in bottles and burn letters to the dead, willing the smoke to take our words up to heaven. In Japan, tens of thousands of mourners have dialed the deceased from a white booth on a grassy hill. The "phone of the wind" offers a disconnected rotary phone and a chance to keep communicating. We are also eager to receive messages from the deceased. The ancient Egyptians looked for their loved ones in blobs of ink, the Maoris in drops of blood. Some Pawnees ask questions of the dead in bowls of water; in Siberia, through copper mirrors. Modern people often recognize loved ones through their day imaginings-- symbolic messages from beyond (feathers on the trail, heart shaped rocks, the flash of a cardinal flying by, the Cubs winning the World Series), through night dreams, and sometimes mediums. In some cases, the deceased themselves fashion the messages before death and send them to those they are leaving behind. One terminally ill husband arranged the delivery of a puppy to his widow's doorstep two months after his passing. The note attached to the collar was in her late husband's handwriting and said, "love him for the both of us."² In video messages of farewell and letters to be opened on anniversaries, the recipients enjoy these assurances of the continuity of love. We crave connection with the deceased-- even though they are not physically there, they are psychologically very present and we *still love*.³ In response to our longing, computer scientists, engineers, and innovators are exploring ways to mediate our angst in very creative ways.

As a culture, we have become increasingly comfortable with technology as a substitute for human interactivity and these approaches offer both benefits and drawbacks. On some college campuses, online drinking games are becoming popular. Students sit alone in their dorm rooms and connect electronically. When they get a question wrong, they drink (by themselves). It helps prevent drunk driving, the spread of STIs, and unplanned pregnancies, but is void of social reciprocity and connection.

Gamers can now learn about romance with Avatar partners. In 3D, virtual worlds users can socialize, connect romantically and communicate via both voice and text chat. The video simulations teach by assigning points—remember a birthday and you earn points, say something disrespectful like "do you have to wear that," you are debited.

Other developments include the release of anatomically correct, full sized, sex dolls embedded with a computer chip that allows both memory and speech. For \$10,000 the consumer can choose both the appearance and the personality of the doll; and she comes complete with "realistic orgasm noises."

¹ Shelley, Mary. 1831/1994. *Frankenstein*, 69. United States: Dover.

² Eastman, Mary. 2001. "What He Left." In *Inside Grief*, by Line Wise, 48-49. Incline Village: Wise Publications.

³ Mogensen, Greg. 1992. *Greeting the Angels*. New York: Baywood.

There is also an option of a male doll, who boasts a “bionic penis.” These applications may assuage our isolation, but one is denied the touch, smell, or uncertainty of spontaneous exchange with a real person. It is like receiving 200 Happy Birthday greetings on Facebook without have a single, actual person to hang out with. In each of these situations, perceptions about relationship appear real but are a computer engineered illusion. Still, there is an appeal—we are seeking something to fill the emptiness, and products to address loneliness are increasing.

The entertainment industry has already played with the possibility of computer generated people standing in as substitutes for loved ones. The movie *HER* portrays an electronic girlfriend available through a smartphone application who is responsive to the protagonist’s every need. He is completely engrossed/in love until he realizes that his “girlfriend” is also servicing millions of others. One episode of *Black Mirror* shows a grieving wife who commissions an android of her dead husband. *The Last Jedi* shows Luke receiving divine wisdom from a holographic Yoda. Some begin with the allure of filling the void of loneliness electronically, but ultimately demonstrate the unsatisfying nature of these relationships. Others portray it as a meaningful exchange.

Innovators are now applying complex technologies to bereavement. A team from London is using holographic technology to deliver messages from the deceased to the bereaved after death. Deceased singers Michael Jackson and Tupac have been revived through the same technology and have been “seen” delivering performances to throngs of enthusiastic fans. From a psychological perspective, delivering messages through holographic technology may be viewed as similar to creating video recordings to be viewed after death. There is consent on the part of the dying, and it may allow them to continue caring, and finish unfinished business. For the bereaved it may help them to more vividly imagine their loved ones without a physical body. It may be a short term salve for pain, offering a representation of someone in the material that we have been forced to imagine in the abstract. There is Uncle Bob in his kilt singing rugby songs to you, or Nonnie showing you how to make ham pies. You can play your child’s violin rendition of “Ode to Joy,” over and over, or hear your Dad say he’s sorry that he was so hard on you, but he really does love you. It is a piece of the puzzle offered by the deceased to be used in the continuing creation on the part of the bereaved. It has the potential to be a treasured, parting gift.

On another level, others are creating electronic, audiographic representations of the deceased based on digital footprints such as emails, texts, tweets, snapchats, and voice recognition software. These interactive chatbots not only characterize the historical deceased, but are also able to create novel communications in response to new situations. Facial recognition software and apps that can read and respond to your emotions already exist. Combining these technologies, you may be able to call up a 3-D image of your deceased grandmother and get her thoughts on your new girlfriend, or ask your father who is no longer alive, about career decisions. It is plausible that these 3-D representations of the dead who interact in real time will be available soon.

Will it be the ultimate panacea for our pain, or a computer generated version of Frankenstein’s monster?

To consider this question, it is helpful to reflect on how we have psychologically negotiated the pain of loving and losing thus far. True intimacy in living relationships includes the honor of being “seen” by someone while enjoying the equal honor of “seeing” them in return to create a shared meaning. This “seeing” is selective and much bigger than the sum of our everyday actions. Your brother was funny and

stimulated the wild/humorous part of yourself; your mother, in her woundedness, saw your pain and provided a safe haven; your weird friend allowed your own weirdness to emerge and be validated. A brother, a mother, and a friend can be in relation to the same person, but each has his or her unique idea of who that person really is, based on the distinctive interactivity. In a sense, we actively “create” identity for our loved ones and they do so for us.

We also “create” the identity of our loved ones after death. Quite organically, we use our imaginations to reconstruct the dead through stories, smells, pictures, objects, and intimate knowledge of the deceased’s values, beliefs, and behaviors. This piecing together or giving form to the lost person is a creative act that allows one to stay in relationship. We remember little Rochida making fruit loop necklaces for her brothers at Christmas from her hospital bed. We hold in our trembling hands the last picture of Ryan showing off his t-shirt (worn under his gown at graduation) that read “My parents just think I went to college.” And, we recall, with a smile, Aunt Teresa’s famous saying, “You look like you’ve been rode hard and put away wet.” *Storymaking* is a vital part of bereavement and helps the historical person transform into an integrity (or angel) that can be embedded into our imaginations and held in connection. Our external relationship transforms into an internal dialogue. Of course, when we remember, or put them back together, we are also learning about who we are in relation to them. We cannot ask “Who were they, really?” without also asking, “Who am I, really?” Though agonizing, bereavement is an extraordinarily individual and creative process that can offer rich information about who the dead were, and who we are now. And ultimately, these archaeological digs into our relationship with the deceased can help us construct the invisible lifeline through which we still love.⁴

With the advent of 3-D, speaking and responsive images of the digital dead, scientists will be doing the “digging” for us and what was formerly an internal dialogue could now transform into an animated, external one. And, like the difference between reading a novel and watching a similar story on the big screen, it may help with our visual conceptualization of the dead. For the short term, it might feed the hungry heart by giving us something close to what we most crave and allow us to express difficult feelings. It could help the disintegrating, historical image of the deceased stay the same, for a while longer. However, over the long-term “work” of grieving, there is a big difference between the bereaved organically creating a composite of the deceased versus using a computer synthesized image. We are consuming *someone* that *something* has created which may have no similarity to our own understanding of the deceased. Additionally, that image would be static.

There is a period in mourning when we may need the dead to stay exactly who they were. We cannot imagine our lives without them, or their lives without us. There are parents who keep their deceased child’s room as it was, and widows who continue to set a place at the table for their late husbands. The gestures speak to our own need to concretize the fading image of the deceased and keep the relationship as it was. With time, attentiveness, and the increasing faith in a continued connection after death, this rigidity is often no longer necessary. Most who have experienced the intense pain of grief know that getting “over it” is absurd. It is more accurately about learning to integrate and continue marching on even when it feels like the world has ended. This integration is not formulaic, but often ordinary moments signal that there is a shift towards rejuvenation—seeing colors or clouds again,

⁴ Mogensen, Greg. 1992. *Greeting the Angels*. New York: Baywood.

feeling the urge to bake, or noticing the smell of pine needles after the rain. It is an organic movement instigated by something that lies between the living and the dead.

The digital dead might serve our immediate need to freeze the loved one in his or her historical identity, but there is no room for growth of the relationship. Imagine approaching a digital version of cantankerous Aunt Lily with a heartfelt expression of your hurt over something she said or did. Aunt Lily is bound to her historical self as gleaned from algorithms that examined her speech and facial patterns. She looks you disdainfully up and down and says, "Suck Wind," because that is what she would have said in life. Perhaps it would be satisfying on some level, but it circumvents the part of grief where we allow the dead to develop in our imaginations. People who dream of the deceased often report that blind people can see again, crippled people can walk, or cantankerous Aunt Lily has softened. Perhaps your deceased mother is now wiser, and more peaceful. And when we can envision an existence for them beyond our tears, when we allow them to move, we are simultaneously allowing a new vision for our own lives.

A Finnish folk tale called "The Spouses" describes the consequences of becoming fixated on the historic relationship with the deceased:

A husband and wife were very much in love and made a pact that if one should die, the other would never re-marry. As fate would have it, the wife died soon thereafter and the husband grieved greatly. After three years, he met another woman who stirred his feelings and decided he would marry her. On the way to the church, he felt the pull to visit his dead wife's grave to bid her farewell, ask forgiveness, and let her know about his new relationship. When he arrived, the grave opened up and there was his dead wife, looking beautiful and offering a glass of wine. "Come talk to me for a while," she said. And he crawled in the coffin with her and drank some wine. They talked and it felt so good but he knew he must go. As he rose to leave, she bid him, "one more glass." He agreed and was lured into the familiar, old companionship, enjoying a second glass of wine. Once more he said, "Enough, I must go as my new bride awaits." Seductively, she implored "But it feels so good, have one more glass of wine," which he did. Finally, he stood up assertively and declared that he must go. On wobbly legs he arrived at the church. But he didn't recognize anyone or anything, including himself. He caught his reflection in the glass and he was gray. He had spent thirty years in the grave.

In some senses, seeking long-term connection to the dead through a relationship with a digital image might be like crawling in the coffin right alongside the deceased. It could leave you stuck, inhibiting future relationships in the physical realm. As the folk tale cautions, we can continue to look to the dead to be spiritually fed, or we can integrate the experience of loss and allow it to deepen our perspective and offer new gifts in the world of the living.

Loss, though painful, offers an opportunity to discover our loved ones, and ourselves in the process. The deceased lose their material identity but develop a psychological reality changed by death. In our day imaginings and night dreams, we are offered an experience of our loved ones without their bodies and given a chance to interact, and evolve. This image of the deceased is a co-creation between the historical person and the vision of the bereaved. As such, our ideas of the dead can be a bridge between past remembrances and future development. It is doubtful that the "magic" of relationship can be generated by a computer in life or across the space of death. It requires the power of the human imagination and an ability to creatively love. It is wise to remember that Dr. Frankenstein, who created out of a desire to master eternal life, was the monster, and not the other way around.

Author

Kim Bateman, Ph.D. is the author of *Crossing the Owl's Bridge: A Guide For Grieving People Who Still Love* (Chiron, 2016) and "Symbolmaking and Bereavement: The Temples at Burning Man" in *And Death Shall Have Dominion* (Interdisciplinary, 2015). She presented a TEDx talk called *Singing Over Bones* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3hibkFclD0>) and serves as the Executive Dean of the Tahoe-Truckee Campus of Sierra College. Visit her website:<http://www.kim-bateman.com> for information on speaking/workshops, blog, and client services.

Supporting Links

Phone of the Wind- <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/tv/documentary/201711160600/>

Online drinking games- <https://drunkpirate.co.uk/>

<https://www.airconsole.com/games/drinking-games>

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Male Sex bots-<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5244155/Male-sex-robots-bionic-penises-coming-2018.html>

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