Tech

DMs From Beyond the Grave Are Changing How We Grieve

By Michael Waters

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This October, when NaKina Talbert glanced out the window of her temporary home in Guatemala and saw a volcano erupting less than 100 miles away, her first instinct was to snap a photo. “It’s pretty far away, but it booms like a cannon!” she tagged the image, with an arrow pointing to the volcano.

Talbert, a 58-year-old painter and former project manager from Dallas, Texas, then logged into her account on SafeBeyond, a digital legacy platform. Here she uploaded the image to her “vault,” a cache of photos, videos, audio messages, and letters she plans to have sent in installments to various family members after her death. There is the message for when her granddaughter (now 14) turns 21, the video for the first Christmas Talbert’s son (now 37) will spend without her, letters to her future great grandchildren (should there be any), and a slew of recordings from the bucket-list trips she has taken over the last year.

Talbert’s visit to Guatemala is her seventh such trip, though she doesn’t know how many more she will be able to make. According to her doctors, she wasn’t even supposed to live this long.

In 2014, Talbert was diagnosed with progressive supranuclear palsy, or PSP, a rare and fast-acting neurodegenerative disease with symptoms similar to Parkinson’s. She soon began making preparations. She knew she wanted to leave her children and grandchildren recordings of her voice—when Talbert’s father died nearly 40 years ago, that was the thing she forgot first. “I can still see his face as clearly as if it were yesterday,” she told me. “But I can’t quite grasp his voice anymore.”

She found SafeBeyond about a year after being diagnosed. It’s one of a growing number of services, including DeadSocial and GoneNotGone, that allow people to

posthumously send video, audio, and text-based messages to their loved ones at planned times. Users of these services could presumably schedule annual birthday videos to be sent to family members from beyond the grave, or write notes, as Talbert has, to be dispatched to future descendants they will never meet.

Most of these services require payment through a subscription plan or a one-time storage purchase. DeadSocial, one of the more prominent digital legacy companies, currently boasts over 12,000 users, according to its founder. It is unclear, however, exactly how many people have signed up across the industry.

Talbert, for her part, is also leveraging SafeBeyond to help plan her funeral, for which she has many requirements. One is that her whole family wear tie-dye, she explained, because she loves the idea that someone will drive by, see a bunch of people crying, and “think they all just got fired from Joe’s Crab Shack.” Her main hope, though, is that SafeBeyond will help her family through their grief once she’s passed away. She has messages planned to be sent throughout their initial year of mourning, including one her son will receive on his first day without her. To Talbert, these messages are a way to reach out and support her kin from the afterlife.

But if we can now regularly receive direct digital messages from deceased loved ones, how is that changing the way we mourn their passing?

IMAGE: NAKINA TALBERT

It’s a newer wrinkle in a much older question—how is technology shaping our relationship with death?—and an emerging field of scholars have already devoted themselves to studying it. Preliminary research suggests consistent posthumous communication in fact can have a positive influence on recipients coming to terms with loss.

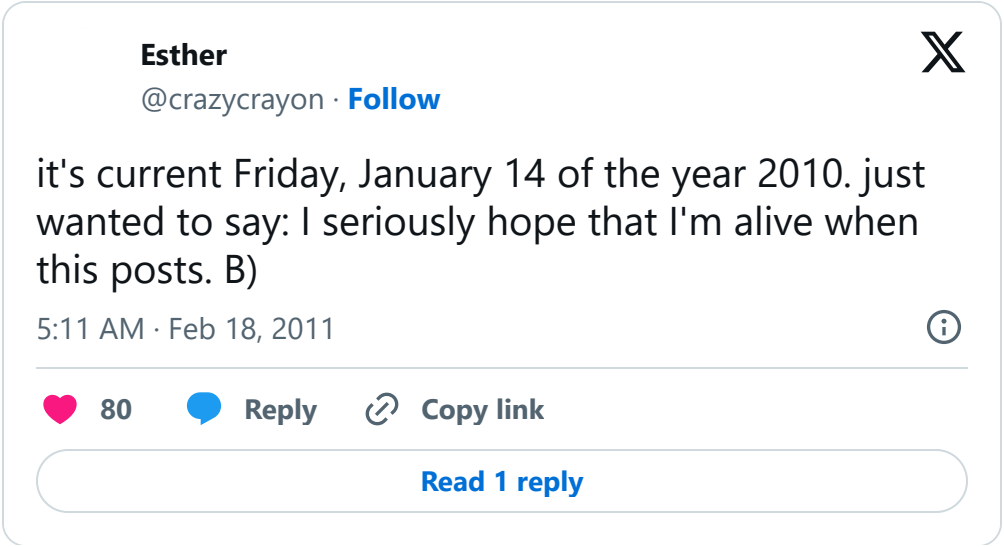
Debra Bassett, a doctoral candidate at the University of Warwick who researches the impacts of death in the digital world, believes that posthumous messages can help their recipients return to a place of grief when they need it most. In general, “most people that I have researched are finding these things a comfort,” Bassett said.

Still, the answer might vary depending on circumstance. In “Shadows of the Dead: Social Media and Our Changing Relationship with the Departed,” a study Bassett published earlier this year, she interviewed individuals who have revisited digital communications from deceased loved ones. She found that while re-reading emails or text messages has indeed helped many people grieve, listening to audio recordings is more complicated. A number of participants, according to the study, felt that “they need to already be having a ‘bad day’ to listen to voice recordings, and that this is done only occasionally and after much consideration.”

And for many people, no matter the mode of communication, receiving a posthumous messages might feel like an ambush.

Lori Earl, whose daughter Esther died of cancer at the age of 16, was shocked when she received an email from Esther around three months after her death. Earl was at a meeting when she received a text from her husband: *Do not open your emails until after your meeting*, it read. She soon understood why.

A few years earlier, it turned out, Esther had written a note addressed to her older self. “Future me,” it began, “I hope you’re doing better than present me.” Her parents hadn’t known about the letter, which had been sent via the service FutureMe, until it unexpectedly hit their inbox.



Soon after, a tweet appeared on Esther's timeline: "it's current [sic] Friday, January 14 of the year 2010. just wanted to say: I seriously hope that I'm alive when this posts. B)." The tweet went live in February 2011, over six months after Esther died. No one is sure what service was used to post the message.

At first, her mother was jarred. Reading communications from her late daughter reignited her grief. "When you experience those feelings and memories, it's a little bit like losing someone all over again," Earl said.

The tweet still evokes raw feelings. But eventually the Earls came to hold Esther's posthumous letter as a source of comfort. Reading it felt like conversing with their daughter, something they dearly missed. Even now, Earl said she finds herself going back to it. "We do read from it often, because it's such an insight into who [Esther] was and what she hoped," she said.

Earl, who has since memorialized Esther's life in the bestselling book *This Star Won't Go Out*, compares confronting posthumous digital messages to wiggling a loose tooth: It hurts every time, "and yet you can't leave it alone." Feeling pain, to her, is better than feeling nothing. And "while a letter may be painful," Earl added, "it will always in some way be healing."

"It'll be the last new thing from him, which will be so, so hard. But at least I get a new thing, so many years after the fact."

Peter Barrett, founder of GoneNotGone, says he wants to avoid posthumous communications catching recipients by surprise. Message recipients have to consent to see messages left for them through the service, Barrett noted. They receive an email that provides a GoneNotGone login, and can disable the service at any time if it makes them uncomfortable.

Barrett genuinely believes that companies like his will help people come to terms with loss. “If you know you are going to hear from someone again and again on your birthday, it becomes something to look forward to,” he said. “The person remains in your life despite not having a physical presence.”

Emma Rose, a 19-year-old college sophomore, would agree. When she was 12, Rose’s uncle died after a three-year battle with brain cancer. Today, she remembers him as a Cookie Monster tattoo connoisseur, a fan of *Say Yes to the Dress* who spoiled his nieces with vacations to Disney World.

AN INFANT ROSE AND HER UNCLE. IMAGE: EMMA ROSE

Prior to his passing, Rose said, he wrote physical letters to be sent to her and her sister at various stages in their lives—one immediately following his death,

another at his memorial service a month later, and a third to be opened on her and her sister's respective wedding days. Rose has yet to read the third.

"With cancer, there's always an element of mourning where you feel as if something's been stolen from you," she told me. "I'm not sure a single holiday or birthday has gone by where I haven't had a moment of, 'He should be here.' Knowing that on my wedding day I won't have to feel like that," she added, "that a part of him will actually be there, is amazing."

In fact, Rose draws so much comfort from the specter of this final letter from her uncle that it actually makes her nervous. "It'll be the last new thing from him, which will be so, so hard," she said. "But at least I get a new thing, so many years after the fact. Not a lot of people do."

In the end, it seems, her uncle got his wish. Rose thinks his great fear was that she and her sister would forget him, since they were young when he died. He didn't want to slip out of their lives; his analog letters were an effort to remain close to them. "In a way it's kinda like he cheated death," Rose said. "Like, 'lol cancer you thought you were gonna prevent me from talking to my nieces on their wedding days? NICE TRY!'"

Her uncle might not have used an online legacy platform to schedule his messages—instead, Rose's aunt is delivering his letters. But Rose's experience is nonetheless analogous to that which might soon be shared by loved ones of those who turned to the likes of GoneNotGone, DeadSocial, and SafeBeyond to effectively curate their digital afterlives.

As for Talbert, she hopes to achieve what Rose's uncle has. She wants her potential great grandchildren to know that their "crazy great grandmother" once

sat in a hammock and watched a volcano erupt from her window. “I think people are most interested in things like that,” she said. “Just cool stories.”

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