

## Already Naked

"Final Thoughts on The Best Commencement Speech . . . Ever"



[This is the last of three reflections on [Steve Jobs' speech to the Stanford Class of 2005](#). These reflections are my two-cents worth, not his – I don't mean to put words in his mouth or make implications about his worldview. AL]

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

— Steve Jobs, Stanford Graduation 2005

In 2004, a doctor told Steve Jobs he had cancer of the pancreas and should go home and get his affairs in order; "which is doctor code for prepare to die," Jobs told the Stanford grads. "It means to try to tell your kids everything you thought you'd have the next 10 years to tell them in just a few months. It means to make sure everything is buttoned up so that it will be as easy as possible for your family. It means to say your goodbyes."

This was not an entirely new idea for Jobs, who decided as a teenager to try living every day as if it were his last. But his adolescent vow was an intellectual simulation – a useful but ultimately pale imitation of the real thing. Facing death simplifies life:

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

It's useful to remember this advice comes from a man already known for coloring outside the lines – and known for persuading others to pick up a crayon and join him. Even friends joke about the *reality distortion field* that occurs when Steve Jobs is in full sales mode. It's startling how often an audience willingly suspends disbelief to follow Jobs where they might not otherwise go. Witness the **iTunes** phenomenon, in which Apple brought music companies and customers together in a monetized exchange almost no one believed was possible until they saw it (Jobs recently persuaded the big music companies to stick with iTunes' 99 cent per song price point – though the record labels had been public about their dissatisfaction before the negotiations to renew their deals with Apple) .

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Had he died in 2004, Steve Jobs would certainly have been remembered for repeatedly changing the game. That he didn't die was an unspeakable relief. It was also an unspoken challenge to stay in the flow of perpetual change. He told the Stanford graduates:

Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away.

Whether he meant to or not, Steve Jobs' speech to the graduates echoes the wisdom of **Ecclesiastes**. Take your time with this passage; read it like an entrepreneur...

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie. Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless.

— Ecclesiastes 11 [New International Version]

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### Discussion Questions

- If you were the parent of one of those Stanford grads, what part of the speech could make you cringe?
- If you were about to employ one of those newly minted workers what parts of Jobs' speech would you underscore? What parts would you cross out?
- If you were one of the graduates, what would be hardest point for you to accept?
- Talk about the most significant part of Jobs' speech from your current point of view.
- Write about the near- and long-term business implications in the passage from Ecclesiastes.