



THE DEATH INDUSTRY GOES DIGITAL

A new crop of apps for people who are getting comfortable with their inevitable demise

On Friday, November 11, scores of Facebook users logged into their accounts to find that they were dead. With the simple addition of the word “Remembering,” placed in front of a name along the top of the that user’s profile page, their accounts became memorials, with banners along the top urging users who were friends with the deceased to use the page as a space to “remember and celebrate [their] life.” But, of course, these people weren’t dead—just the victims of a bug that Facebook quickly fixed. Meanwhile, it gave many access to a feature they otherwise, ideally, hadn’t had reason to use: the Facebook Memorialized Account.

Since 2009, Facebook has offered family and friends of deceased users the option to turn their profiles into a memorial; as of 2012, an estimated 30 million accounts belonged to people who had died. The memorialized profile can’t be logged into, barring potential hacks, and it allows friends to post memories and images, but prevents the account from triggering things like birthday reminders or reconnection suggestions. It’s the social media equivalent of a grave, each anecdote or “thinking of you” a bouquet placed at the headstone, turning a not-insignificant portion of Facebook into a digital cemetery.

We readily adapt the tools we've been given to process grief, turning feeds and walls and timelines into messageboards for the dead. Social media mourning is a new kind of grief expression—more collaborative, and widespread in its immediacy and visibility; it's less concerned with privacy or propriety. Now, tech startups are coming forward to draw on this new fluency, offering what they market as better, more specific tools to deal with death, both in our experience of it and preparation for it. The death industry is profitable, perpetually necessary, and notoriously set in its ways—why not shake it up?

Cake (as in simple, like “a piece of cake”) is just one of those disrupters. The Boston-based web app, born in an MIT health-focused hack-a-thon and just over a year old, brings slick design and simplicity to end-of-life planning. The site is built around decks—bundles of digital flashcards that walk you through complicated things like advance funeral planning, life insurance, and health care preferences through series of yes or no questions—which deliver you to the third-party resources that will help you both enact those preferences and share them with the people who might survive you.

RECOMMENDED READING

- **CULTURE:** ‘2 Girls 1 Cup’: An Investigation Into the Web’s Shittiest Mystery
- **CULTURE:** What’s The Deal With Pussy Slapping?
- **CULTURE:** Our Age-Old Quest to Find a Porn Star Who Looks Like the Girl Next Door
- **CULTURE:** A Highly Questionable Cultural History of Richard Gere’s Ass Gerbil

“Our design philosophy is to meet people where they are,” Suelin Chen, Cake co-founder and CEO, told me over the phone. “Legal documents and forms are important, but they aren’t the appropriate starting point. First you need to have clarity on your values and preferences. We want to help people get clarity on that, and then make it really easy to communicate those preferences to your loved ones.” It’s the entry point for the person who doesn’t know what he doesn’t know, and like the most effective tools, it turns a chore into something that *almost* feels like a game.

The app wasn't necessarily built with millennials in mind, but the user experience will certainly be familiar to anyone who's ever filled out an OkCupid questionnaire or online personality quiz. And while the need for end-of-life planning might feel more immediate to older populations, 25- to 34-year-olds are close behind the 55–64 demographic as Cake's second most populous user group. Chen attributed this to a generational dismissal of the death taboo, an openness among young people to think about death because of its presence in their social media channels. Perhaps, if you're keyed into life updates from upwards of 300 people on an everyday basis, the deaths those friends and followers experience might feel much more present in your own life. Perhaps witnessing others' grief makes one's own death less of an abstract inevitability and more of a real and tangible possibility—and something worth curating, if you're given the chance.

Cake taps into the creative side of death planning, with decks prompting users to consider how many people they'd want at their funeral, what food they'd serve, what music they'd play. (Each bio on Cake's "About Us" page includes a funeral playlist.) It's one example of a consistent underlying theme among death management services: the idea that thinking about death is intrinsically tied to thinking about life. This is built into Cake—Chen explains that the name is twofold, intended to convey celebration as well as simplicity. The app works both implicitly in questions about taste, and explicitly through the "Bucket List" deck, which encourage users to keep track of everything they want to do while still alive. Cake doesn't want to be a one-time-use-only tool, something you log into once to get the decisions over with; the user's profile lives and changes along with the user, and the app itself.

SafeBeyond, self-described as "the world's most advanced ongoing legacy management service," is also built for integration into daily life—it's one of the few services with a mobile app. The company, which launched in 2015, offers secure space (1GB for free memberships, 3GB for paid) to store messages to loved ones which will be released after the user's death (though not more than 25 years in the future—something to keep in mind for the younger demographics considering using). All messages are kept in separate "safes" designated to different "heirs" which don't move from the site; the "heirs" are simply given access to them when the time is right. For those worried about what happens if the app shuts before

that time comes, SafeBeyond offers a somewhat vague assurance in [their FAQ section](#) that they've "invested a great deal of money to ensure full process automation"—guaranteeing your messages will at least be presented to the people you've specified.

Users can choose among three types of messages—those triggered by a specific date, a specific event (like a daughter's wedding), or a specific location (which the loved one would have to "check into" in order to receive)—as well as store passwords and other digital assets to be maintained by an appointed trustee. Again, though the most obvious motivation to use such a service would be old age or a health scare, the app is designed for regular use—jotting down a thought here or video there, as if in a personal journal.

"Our vision is that people will create messages on an ongoing basis that will be released at different important moments in their loved ones' lives in the future," Dov Sugarman, strategic partnership manager at SafeBeyond, told me over email. The service has over 20,000 users, some of whom create a handful of messages as part of their end-of-life plans and others who've slotted it in alongside the other methods of real-time archiving—photos on Instagram, updates on Facebook.

The app isn't alone in its mission to digitize legacies; Afternote is something of an amalgam of Cake and SafeBeyond, offering users a place to hold not just messages to their friends and family, but also their personal timeline, end-of-life wishes, account information and preferences for all social media profiles, and bucket list. These apps wouldn't supersede social media—until death, they lack the sharing aspect social media is built on—but the impulse to use one mimics that which drives the other. We post for our followers, yes, but we also post for posterity.

At least one tech startup believes the experience of death *should* be social. LifePosts is what Facebook would be if it nixed news completely—[its introductory page](#) laments the mixing of "life's little moments" with "boxing kangaroos and political outrage"—and though it has an overwhelming emphasis on death, it's built to commemorate all manner of milestones. Users can create [memorials](#) or [celebrations](#) (preset templates include things like birthdays, anniversaries, graduations) which others can add to either through general comments or in response to prompts ("How did he inspire you?"; "What always made her smile?").

Memorials that are currently public on the beta site contain moving life stories, funeral information, crowdfunding links to recoup funerary costs, and testimonials from those who knew the deceased—the types of things that would exist disparately on a funeral home page, a Facebook profile, maybe a local news site. The scope of the site is ambitious, a vast platform to track small victories and life-changing achievements, and its success would seem to rely on the willingness of users to consider death as another cause for celebration—a somber milestone, but a milestone nonetheless. These stories could be told on old Facebook walls, but grief is as much about the mourner as it is about the mourned, and perhaps there's comfort in taking new action, carving out a dedicated plot in a space created specifically for remembrance rather than returning to the deceased's old digital haunts.

Social media has changed the way we engage with death; it's a quick jump between an obituary and a social media profile (MyDeathSpace, an online archive collecting MySpace and Facebook profiles of people who've died, recognized this as early as 2006) and anyone who has seen a Facebook profile memorialized knows how the wall can be transformed into a receptacle for birthday messages to the deceased, memories recalled, moments that made the person posting think of their late friend. Most of these comments are met with likes by others who were also friends with the deceased, people who might still find occasion to revisit.

On the flip side, our social media presence allows each of us to actively curate the public legacy we'll leave behind. Maybe we're not consciously thinking about our death when we're posting photos, links, and memes, but I'd wager the anxiety is lying dormant. (Maybe less dormant in some social media spheres—a visit to Facebook groups about [nihilist](#) or existential memes shows the readiness of strangers to joke about their mortality online.) As recently as 2013, a study of U.S. adults showed that only 26 percent had a living will, with the most common reason for *not* having one being a lack of awareness. If grief is becoming more open, and the conversation around death more progressive, perhaps that figure is on its way up.

Arianna Rebolini

POPULAR

- 1** Real Italians Put Hot Dogs and French Fries on Their Pizza
 - 2** The Other Drug War: Inside the World of Counterfeit Viagra
 - 3** The \$65 Million Art Heist That Put 'Ocean's Eleven' to Shame
-

RECOMMENDED READING



DIGITAL CULTURE

The Age of Orbs and Pondering



TRUE CRIME

Tickle Me Kaczynski: How the Inventor of the Ultimate Elmo Toy Became a Unabomber Suspect

[More Stories from MEL](#)