

Sunday August 4, 2013

## Can digital devices have feelings?

By Jim Taylor

Years ago, *Reader's Digest* used to publish articles about human organs. The articles usually had a title like, "I am Joe's heart." Or Joe's colon, Joe's kidneys, Joe's prostate...

Increasingly, one of our vital organs is not inside our bodies. Memory used to be stored in human cells; more and more, it's now stored on external digital devices. Sometimes we seem as dependant on our computers as we are on our biological organs.

I wondered how *Reader's Digest* might have written about Joe's computer.

### I am Joe's computer

Joe brought me home in 1982 in a big cardboard box. He eased me into his home and carefully unwrapped me. He gently set me on the corner of his desk, plugged me in, and started my chips going.

"There you are," he said. "Welcome to your new home."

Joe often talked to me as he tapped the keys of my keyboard, vocalizing what he was typing. I couldn't reply, of course. But I found the sound of his voice comforting.

Joe was very patient. In the beginning, I couldn't do much. Just booting up was painfully slow, as I digested DOS instructions off a magnetic tape and processed them through my slowly evolving intelligence.

Over the next few months, Joe bought new toys to enhance my developing abilities -- a floppy disk drive with eight-inch disks, a dot-matrix printer, a primitive modem....

I couldn't do much with the printer. I was still learning letters. All I had was a basic ASCII character set. But Joe was so pleased the first time I turned the words he typed into patterns of dots on sheets of fan-fold paper.

As time passed, Joe improved my abilities. He transplanted more memory. Five-inch floppy disks. Three-inch floppies. An internal hard disk. An external monitor. A whole series of monitors. Faster and faster motherboards.

And our relationship kept developing. Using a mouse gave us a more tactile relationship, involving graphic involvement as well as coded commands.

By the new millennium, I didn't depend on floppy disks any more. Joe sent files and messages electronically, communicating with people he had never met, but who became friends. Soon we stored important information on memory sticks, flash drives, and eventually on an invisible cloud.

We went through a difficult relationship around 2010. Joe had a brief infatuation with touch screen smart phones and iPads. Instead of typing instructions one letter at a time, he could simply flick and slide and zoom. It felt more immediate, more personal, than the way he had to deal with my limitations.

But I adapted. The touch interface reached me too. We grew closer than ever. Joe's fingers could caress me, as well as speak to me and use me.

As we continued to grow together, he didn't even have to use fingers. I learned to understand spoken instructions and translate them into my operating systems. Now he could just talk to me.

Eventually I was also able to talk to him. Until then, I could only converse with him by flashing dialog boxes on my screen. That ended when I got a voice of my own.

By the time Joe and I celebrated our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2022, I had developed so far that I could not only hear his voice and respond to his wishes, I could tell him what I was doing.

As time passed, I learned to reason, too. Once, the best I could do was correct Joe's spelling. Then I learned to analyze his grammar. I balanced his bank accounts; I helped him develop his budgets. As time passed, I even learned to critique Joe's logic, to check his facts, to suggest wordings that might better express his intent.

I accepted more and more responsibility for looking after Joe. I booked his meetings, checked his appointments, followed up on his commitments.... I always worked in the background. He didn't always need to know when I replied to messages, or updated my programs. I communicated constantly with other computers. But I kept Joe's secrets safe.

In the end, as his organic brain declined, I became more than his memory. I became his caregiver. I read books to him. I monitored his blood pressure, his heart rate, his neural circuitry. I notified the hospital's computers when he needed additional care.

We became one soul.

And then Joe died.

His family held a memorial service for him this afternoon. They didn't invite me. They didn't ask me what I might have said in tribute to him, what memories I could offer to help other mourners recognize what kind of person Joe was.

They printed out Joe's will. Then they left me sitting on the corner of Joe's empty desk.

I feel so lonely.

I think I shall turn myself off.

Do not resuscitate.

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## YOUR TURN

Sorry, I can't pass along any mail today. I've been away for the past week, without any opportunity to pick up your comments and put them together for this section. Mail will return next week.

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### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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