aggressive generals of the American Civil War. Following an
evening reconnaissance during the battle of Chancellorsville,
Jackson was mistakenly wounded by his own men, resulting
in the amputation of his arm. While recovering from surgery,
he developed pneumonia, and by Sunday, May 10, it became
clear that he would not last through the day. Jackson remarked
to his physician, “I have always desired to die on Sunday.”
His consciousness waxed and waned through the day, but just be-
fore he died he awoke and said, “Order A.P. Hill to prepare for
action! Pass the infantry to the front. . . . Tell Major Hawks—.”
He then paused and spoke a last time, “Let us cross over the
river and rest under the shade of the trees.”

Thomas Edison (1847–1931) traveled from his home and
laboratory at Menlo Park to Dearborn, Michigan, to cel-
brate the fiftieth anniversary of his invention of the electric
light. After being introduced by President Herbert Hoover,
Edison delivered a brief speech and then collapsed. The presi-
dent’s physician quickly rushed to Edison’s aid and determined
that he was suffering from pneumonia. Edison returned to his
home, but never fully recovered. On Edison’s last day, his wife,
Mina, leaned close and asked, “Are you suffering?” He replied,
“No, just waiting.” Edison then looked out of his bedroom
window and softly spoke his last words. “It’s very beautiful
over there.”

The intensive care setting, with mechanical ventilation,
dialysis, and the use of sedatives and narcotics that blunt the
senses to make the therapies tolerable, has added years to the
lives of many people. The years so gained, ironically, may be an
untold loss of wisdom stifled by the technology that spawned it.
Recent years have brought recognition of the importance of
compassionate end-of-life care.10 Death without technology get-
ing in the way may provide the tranquility needed to hear
the wisdom and wishes of a person with a foot on the edge of
a separate existence.

Last words and last moments, whether spoken on the way
to the gallows or from a deathbed, are prominent in
history, literature, and tradition, and are often held to contain a special
truth. If you think that the opportunity to have a last say is
unimportant, consider the alleged last words of the Mexican
bandit, revolutionary, and folk hero Francisco “Pancho” Villa
(1878–1923). As he lay dying, killed by the supporters of a long-
time enemy, he made a final request to newspaper reporters:
“Don’t let it end like this. Tell them I said something.”

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Stop investigation of the frayed loop,
the live wire unidentified and lost
in a mess of concentration. Thought’s
gimcrack circuitry sparks up when I fall
and fly horizontal, but behaves normal
when regimes of technique seek the spoiled
site. Working back to front, I walk through
red, blue, and green ganglions—cut which one?
And accept the news when doctors shrug,
say Unremarkable and We’re done.
My devious bomb emits no sound, heat, or light;
the only place to discover the mechanism
is after explosions ruled by no clock,
busts never timed. I’m left with no brainy dent,
bump, or scrape—just a mind firecracker
that goes off, lit by an obscure mischief
that prefers a burst. Then rest.

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