

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 before 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."^{9p211}

Thomas Edison (1847–1931) traveled from his home and laboratory at Menlo Park to Dearborn, Michigan, to celebrate 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 president'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."^{7p65}

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 getting 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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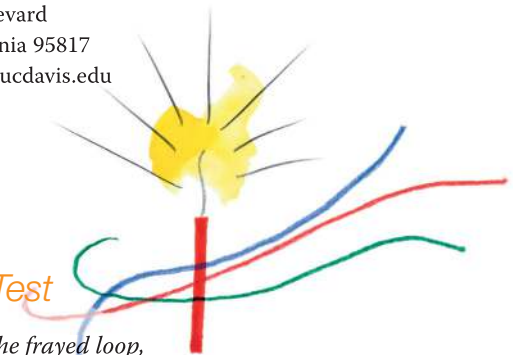
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After the Last Test

*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,
blasts 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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