

At a loss for words

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Go on, get out! Last words are for fools who haven't said enough!

—Karl Marx^{1p115}

In the United States in this century, technology, discovery, and medicine have added almost two decades to human life expectancy. From 59.7 years in 1930, life expectancy has increased to 76.9 years in the year 2000. Mechanical ventilation is one example of a technology that has extended many lives. The idea of employing assisted ventilation for resuscitation originated in the mid-eighteenth century. The pivotal development of the negative pressure ventilator in the 1930s, a result of the worldwide polio epidemic, resulted in the advance of practical mechanical ventilation and was an impetus for the development of the intensive care unit.^{2,3} One sacrifice mechanical ventilation imposes, however, is that many dying patients spend their final days with an endotracheal tube in place, on a ventilator, receiving narcotics and sedatives.

The gains in survival that new technologies and research give are achieved at a cost not yet fully explored: the absence of the dying person's last words. In the moments before a person dies, technology may prevent clarity of thought and the opportunity to communicate with those at the bedside.

Types of last words include: (1) the composed thoughts of the famous or infamous on their way to the gallows, (2) requested parting wisdom of an alert person in his or her final moments, (3) accidental utterances overheard before unexpected death, and (4) final words spoken by a suffering soul, a person momentarily rising from a comatose state to offer a final gift.

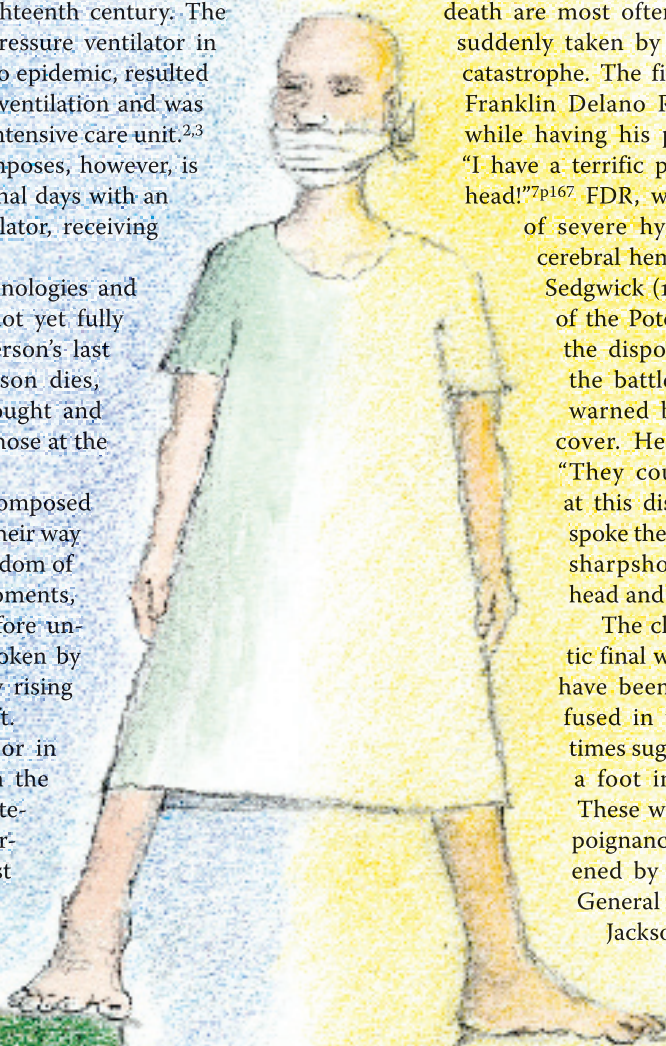
Last words said upon the gallows or in the electric chair are not at risk from the advances of medical science. Such statements are often meaningful and inspiring. Examples include some of the most famous. Nathan Hale's (1755–1776) immortal last words, "I only regret

that I have but one life to lose for my country."^{4p484} have been learned by American, if not British, school children since 1776. Contrast them with the final words of Socrates (469–399 B.C.), who after drinking the hemlock and feeling the coldness of death remarked: "Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget."^{5p198}

Final words in response to a request to share some final wisdom or wishes with the world are exemplified by the last words of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1530), author of *The Prince*. When asked what he wished in the hereafter he responded: "I desire to go to hell, and not to heaven. In the former place I shall enjoy the company of popes, kings, and princes, while in the latter are only beggars, monks, hermits, and apostles."^{6p178} Another example would be the last words of Karl Marx (1818–1883) who said, "Go, get out! Last words are for fools who haven't said enough!"^{1p115}

Accidental utterances overheard before death are most often heard when a life is suddenly taken by violence, accident, or catastrophe. The final words of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945), while having his portrait painted, were "I have a terrific pain in the back of my head!"^{7p167} FDR, who had a long history of severe hypertension, died of a cerebral hemorrhage. General John Sedgwick (1813–1864) of the Army of the Potomac, while examining the disposition of his troops at the battle of Spotsylvania, was warned by his officers to take cover. He dismissively replied, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." As the general spoke these words, a Confederate sharpshooter shot him in the head and killed him.^{8p109}

The clear though often cryptic final words of those who may have been unconscious or confused in their final days sometimes suggest that the dying have a foot in both life and death. These words, with their special poignancy, are the word threatened by a technological death. General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson (1824–1863) was one of the finest and most



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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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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