

RIP, Steve Jobs

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As soon as I heard that Steve Jobs had died I went on Facebook and posted, “RIP, Steve Jobs.” There were many responses, some that surprised me. A few people talked in glowing terms about how Jobs had transformed their lives, as though he were a spiritual guru. Some talked as though they were losing a long-time friend. This response surprised me: these people didn’t know him personally, and while Jobs could be charming and charismatic on stage, otherwise he wasn’t very accessible and could be prickly.

For baby boomers the passing of Jobs has special meaning. We not only remember a time before personal computers but also that Steve Jobs was a baby boomer, one of us. Our generation has a reputation for being self-indulgent, yet Jobs was a highly disciplined, self-motivated person who used his creative genius for the common good. He makes us proud.

I wonder if something more is involved in the great outpouring of grief over Jobs’s death. Is it because we are addicted to our technological gadgets and, like a drug dealer, Jobs supplied new gadgets to feed our habit? Is it just another sign of our consumer culture that a creator of consumer products is revered and grieved when he dies?

Here is another explanation: Jobs may represent the end of a great period of American achievement, from Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. We have a right to worry that the next Steve Jobs will not be American, but will come instead from Japan, China or India

Political analyst Howard Fineman said the next general election in the United States is a referendum on whether we can nurture a future Steve Jobs and allow him to flourish and benefit from his creativity. To nurture a future Jobs is the vision of Democrats: we’ll need planning and government initiative and expenditure to provide the conditions that nurture genius. Think about all the creative energy produced by the government’s response to the Soviet launching of Sputnik. School

children were encouraged to pursue careers in science and engineering. Student grants and loans were provided to make it happen. It is part of the Republican agenda to give freedom to creative geniuses and entrepreneurs like Jobs in order to flourish and to benefit from their efforts.

The great success of the American experiment in the 20th century was that there was a balance between the two: the nurturing of conditions to grow talent and the freedom to let creative, entrepreneurial people flourish on their own. Can we strike that balance again? We need a national conversation about what that might look like in the 21st century.