



A 90-Year Old and His iPad: An Unlikely Romance

by Chitra Ragavan · 09 Oct 2020 · 11 min read

In this fast-changing world, many elderly individuals have had a hard time embracing technology. The keys of a laptop often feel forbidding to a generation used to ink flowing from a pen; the abstract network of mobile connections far more inappreciable than landlines tethering their phone conversations. In short, they are an analog generation lost in a digital world. My dad, on the other hand, was just the opposite, jumping into the tech rabbit hole at age 76, when I gave him his first laptop.

Dad was amazed by the look and feel of his brand new 2006 Apple MacBook—the smooth white polycarbonate casing immediately lured him into a dizzying new world of emails, digital media, and social media that not only quenched his thirst for current events but also connected him to the ones he loved until his very last breath.

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Dad died this spring in my brother’s home in New Jersey from complications due to old age, just shy of 90. It was only then that he finally let go of his trio of constant companions in his final decade of life—his iPad, iPhone, and MacBook Pro.

In some ways, Dad’s love of tech was an unlikely romance. As a career banker and later, a senior executive in an Indian commodities company, Dad never had to touch tech. In fact, in India at the time, any form of tech (including typewriters, and later, computers) was viewed as lower status—something to be delegated to paid staff. So, the higher Dad rose in his career, the less connectivity he had with technology.

However, in other ways, it was entirely natural that Dad would embrace technology to share his love of knowledge with the world.

From Village Square to Global Village

T. Vijayaraghavan, known simply as TVR to his friends, had an intellect as deep as his name was long and an unparalleled discipline that followed him everywhere his life took him.

Born in 1930 in a small village in South India, Dad was the son of a homemaker and a brilliant barrister, whom he revered. The youngest of eight children, Dad grew up in the shadow of the British Empire, fueled by world events including the Great Depression and World Wars I and II.

Dad’s fascination with technology came as a young boy when sound movies or “talkies” were invented. Transfixed by Hollywood classics, he spent his allowance pennies to get

ice cream (he had a big sweet tooth) and movie tickets. He sat on the dusty ground in the village square on every chance he got, watching the talkies. Golden age hits starring the likes of Clark Gable, Shirley Temple, and Spencer Tracy sucked him into not only a lifelong passion for films but also a newfound reverence for the technology that allowed it to happen.

Dad's first brief job was as a journalist where he first learned touch typing but through most of his adulthood, like many in his generation in India, he went without personal tech. However, later on in life his frequent trips to the U.S. to spend time with his kids and grandkids rekindled the tech love from his childhood that would inspire and sustain him in his final days.

The Two Loves of his Life

Under the tutelage of his father and a school teacher who capitulated and allowed him to sit in his older brother's class instead of his own, Dad skipped two elementary school grades and eventually became the only sibling to go to college.

Mom, on the other hand, never made it to college. She and Dad had an arranged marriage as is customary in India, when she was just 17. Nine years his junior, Mom was whip-smart and tough as nails but with a marshmallow heart. She was a feminist in her own right, paying our maid's daughters' school fees, urging them to get a college degree and resist marrying too early in life. I know Mom often chafed at being a homemaker and in another time and place, she might have become an architect.

While Mom was at home forging our family, Dad was traveling all over the world for work and gaining a global perspective. He loved reading, had an encyclopedic command of history, politics, and economics, and could absorb and retain vast amounts of information. Though dad was better read and better traveled, Mom held up her own in their feisty relationship and he respected and loved her, though she drove him batty with

her strong opinions and stubbornness. Dad taught Mom to become a serious newspaper reader, too. I'll always remember them, first thing in the mornings, sitting and reading the papers together and drinking scalding hot strong Madras coffee.

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When my brother Ramesh and I and our families began sharing our love of Apple products with Dad and Mom, it was a match made in heaven for Dad. Tech skyrocketed Dad's reading to the next level—and he would spend hours each day on his iPad, devouring more than a dozen newspapers and magazines online, including the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Economist, and more.

Both his marriage to Mom and his relationship with his electronic devices (arranged by his kids) grew into true love. Mom was his first love, always. But his iPad was a close second. And that led to some tensions between them.

Unlike Dad, Mom was not in love with tech, in fact, she was barely even in like. Her iPhone was more a means to an end. Initially tolerant of Dad's intense focus on the treasure trove of reading—the digital candy assuaging his intellectual sweet tooth—Mom became irritated of their hold over him as the years passed. “Always on your iPad,” she would exclaim. “I'm going to throw it away one day.”

Dad knew Mom's bark was way worse than her bite. Anyway, she had a soft voice, and at that point he was rapidly losing his hearing, so he probably never heard her threat. Dad also was looking for a tech buddy, and with some artful persuasion, he managed to get her on Facebook. She rarely posted, but was diligent in reading the relatives' gossip and news. She would never admit she enjoyed it but would check it quietly every day. She only sent me a handful of emails in her lifetime, usually dictated to Dad. “Mom says to eat well,” was a typical one.

One-Man RSS Feed

Armed with his own email address, Dad quickly became a one-man RSS feed, flooding the inboxes of family, friends, and relatives with highly-tailored news clippings, faster than we could read them, each with a personalized note attached.

Even the Apple News app would have a hard time competing with Dad's algorithmic-like penchant for knowing exactly what article each of us would need at any given moment in our life: tech and media stories for me; China trade articles for my trade negotiator then-husband Tim; music stories for my singer-songwriter son, Adi; history and politics for my younger son Naveen; and stone and granite industry articles for his beloved daughter-in-law, Geetha and granddaughter Meghna. And everyone got regular forwards from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Become a member," Dad would say to me, always in awe of their collection.

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Facebook was a natural next step. Dad began to share his favorite articles and his opinions about current affairs with friends and relatives. And, an occasional slip-up of the “caps-lock” key would result in his entire entry BEING FORMATTED LIKE THIS. But for him, that was just part of the thrill of being globally connected at the push of a button.

Rapid Decline

When Mom died four years ago after losing a short, brutish battle with late-diagnosed end stage cancer, Dad relocated from India to New Jersey to live with Ramesh and Geetha, just a three hour drive from my home in Northern Virginia.

Losing Mom, his best friend and muse, after 60 years of spirited marriage left Dad to his own devices and his health plummeted. He could no longer move about and enjoy the American life he had always dreamed of. So, more and more, Dad relied on technology to immerse him in the goings-on in America and the world that he could no longer experience on his own two feet. Increasingly he became homebound, along with several hospital visits over his final four years. Osteoarthritis was slowly robbing him of his ability to walk beyond a few steps from his bedroom to the kitchen and back.

Constantly in pain but never uttering a word of complaint, Dad's dependence on his gadgets grew deeper, as he virtually lost all his hearing and was unable to communicate freely. But, his love for and familiarity with his trusty iPad made it easy for us to simply jot a quick note on it for him to see—an effective method of communication for someone who longed for connectivity but lacked the ears to still do so.

Tim, the kids, and I visited as often as we could, just quietly sitting on the bed and doing our work while Dad sat in his recliner by the window, reading on his iPad, looking up from time to time to comment on something he had just read. I watched his favorite Matlock, and NCIS reruns with him, and he and Ramesh caught up on Rizzoli and Isles episodes. Adi napped with him every chance he could, arms thrown across Dad's chest and both kids hugged him till his frail bones hurt. They knew their time with "Thatha," as they called him, was running out.

Instrument of Torture

As he grew frailer, Dad could no longer share as much content as he used to, one finger slowly tap-tapping emails on his iPad keyboard. Sometimes he sent the same articles five or six times. Garbled emails and social media posts started to appear, causing everyone anxiety. He began to hallucinate more and more. Sometimes, he forgot Mom had died and thought she was busy in the kitchen cooking for him.

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In the final months, Dad’s iPhone became an instrument of torture both for himself and my brother in two ways. Dad anxiously speed-dialed Ramesh whenever he left the house for even a short while to get his work done, once up to 50 times in less than 2 hours. As Dad’s hallucinations increasingly worsened, the technology he once loved began to hinder him more than help. He even began to think someone had planted chips in his iPhone and iPad, to spy on him and asked us to check them over and over again.

We were sad to see that the tech he loved so much had, in his mind, turned against him. But Ramesh and Geetha dutifully kept his devices in his hands for as long as possible to give him maximum autonomy.

In March, we knew Dad was reaching the finish line in his life when he finally put down his iPad and stopped reading. Then, on March 14, he was gone.

Choppy Waters

Last month, we immersed Dad’s ashes in the ocean, about four miles off the Jersey shore. Dad had a final great view of his beloved New York City as Ramesh leaned precariously over the boat in very choppy waters to dunk the ashes, the boat captain hanging on to him by his belt buckle to keep him from going overboard with Dad.

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Looking back, I realize why becoming our RSS news feed was so important to Dad. Technology had given him a precious way to communicate with us as he was losing his hearing. It was his digital landline to us, grounding him as his health disintegrated. His gadgets had occupied and consoled him after Mom died so suddenly, leaving him alone and bereft. The concentrated daily hours of reading probably helped delay the onset of his hallucinations and mental problems well into his final days.

Hopefully, by introducing Dad to the marvels of technology, we were able to give him a respite from grief and pain and a wondrous new way to experience the world, even from the confines of his chair. I know that Dad is looking down on all of us now—with the latest iPad right beside him.