

## On Steve Jobs and Stewart Brand

In the closing remarks of his 2005 commencement speech at Stanford, (widely replayed on the news after his death: [link below](#)), Steve Jobs talked about how much he had been influenced by The Whole Earth Catalogue, first published by Stewart Brand in 1969. The subtitle of Brand's Catalogue was "access to tools". It was both an outcome-of and call-to-action for the "back to the land" movement of those years ... and by "tools", Brand largely meant things like shovels, axes and wheelbarrows, but also the latest technology, from one-man milling machines to computers to communications equipment: anything that might help one live off the land; independent of the corporate infrastructure which was beginning to devour people and the planet.

My sister gave me a copy of The Whole Earth Catalogue for my high school graduation present that year. It was interesting, I thought at the time, though not particularly useful. We lived, after all, in New York City, where one doesn't need tools ... and where there is no land. We had, if I remember correctly, a hammer, a screwdriver, and a broken pair of pliers in the back of the kitchen utensil drawer ... and that was it.

But one thing often leads to another; and not too many years later I found myself designing and building solar homes (and lots of other things) not too far from where Brand and Jobs were. It was an extraordinarily creative place and time. Everything about American culture was being redefined: from social-justice issues to human-rights issues to how we feed and house ourselves. The Whole Earth Catalogue was the how-to manual of those days; the bible of our generation was the way Jobs' put it. It was a practical, hands-on, up-close-and-personal handbook for living sustainably ... published at a time when sustainability hadn't yet been defined. And it was all tied to reality; that physical, material world which we inhabit.

That was Stewart Brand's legacy.

So I thought it not only odd, but somewhat offensive, that Jobs would mention Brand and the Whole Earth Catalogue in his speech. After all, in the intervening four decades or so, the corporate infrastructure has devoured almost everyone and everything, including Stewart Brand's vision ... and Steve Jobs is emblematic of that unfortunate development.

Now don't take me wrong. I know all about the positive side of IT. I wrote my first software program as a 12 year old freshman in 1965 on my high-school's primitive Underwood-Olivetti computer; and twenty years later I developed the first computerized scheduling system for my company when I was construction manager at the then new Apple Computer Headquarters (oddly enough). Today I make about as much use of IT as I possibly could; owning several domains and websites, an internet social-networking site, over a dozen YouTube videos and so on. There's no doubt that the computer is an extremely powerful tool; the most powerful ever I suppose.

But like Dr. Gatling's gun, the best intentioned inventions can have the most horrific results ... not only from misuse, but from unintended consequences of immense proportions.

Over the years I watched as Steve Jobs' influence grew, along with the number of his devotees and a kind of irrational exuberance about the future of technology. The virtual reality embedded within that little box seemed to offer (to them) so much more than that physical reality that Brand (and I) loved so much. Gradually, the attention of entire generations began to turn away from the physical world and toward the virtual world of cyberspace.

I see them now, those generations of irrationally exuberant cyberspace devotees, largely unaware that there is a real world out there: a genuine, physical, natural world of staggering beauty; a world which is a delight to interact with and be a part of. But it is a world that is slowly, or rather rapidly, disappearing; and the reasons that it is disappearing are, in no small part, attributable with the world's growing obsession with the internet.

Stewart Brand's vision of using tools and technology to live closer to nature and free of the oppressive corporate infrastructure has been reversed ... largely by the vision and influence of Steve Jobs. The natural world offers little of value to the internet generations, other than as an abstract idea with no more substance than a video-game. They are both urban and corporate, these cyberspace devotees; two concepts which were anathema to Brand and his devotees.

And so the natural world is going away; and it is going away because it is being urbanized and corporatized; and because generations have become convinced that the virtual world has more value than the natural world.

That, I expect, will be Steve Jobs' legacy.

**Jobs at Stanford:** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc>

