

I've been **thinking**...



Admitting Wrong
April 2012

I've been thinking about admitting wrong.

Hmm. There's more than one way you could take that, huh? Like Someday when I get around to it (I'm not sure) I may admit that I was wrong about something. Actually, I've been thinking about the concept of admitting wrong. So don't get your hopes up. No juicy confessions this month except that I wish it were easier for me to admit when I have been wrong or made a mistake.

Brian Goldman, an ER physician from Toronto, is host of the award-winning [White Coat, Black Art](#) on CBC Radio and slated to deliver the keynote at [The unSUMMIT for Bedside Barcoding](#) in Anaheim this May. His TED lecture, entitled, "[Doctors make mistakes. Can we talk about it?](#)" had already been viewed by 386,072 others before I watched it last week.

Articulately and humbly, the physician talks openly about several serious and potentially serious medical errors he has made over his career and how the prospect for more errors lingers: "I'd like to be able to say to you that my worst mistakes only happened in my first five years of practice (as some of my colleagues say, which is total BS). But some of my doozies have happened in the last five years."

I first heard the now-tired joke from an RN: A nurse dies and goes to heaven where she's greeted by St. Peter. Over his shoulder she spots a man in a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck. She protests, "There are doctors in heaven?" Peter answers, "No, that's God. He just *thinks* he's a doctor."

The fact is, nurses and doctors have this in common (with the rest of us, I might add): We are human and make mistakes, which we find difficult to admit.

Four centuries before it appeared as the title of the Institute of Medicine's landmark report on medication errors, [To Err is Human](#) was the first half of Alexander Pope's trustworthy maxim: "To err is human, to forgive divine."

I found Dr. Goldman's 19-minute lecture on YouTube refreshingly human—free from God-playing—especially juxtaposed to *Steve Jobs* by Walter Isaacson, the iBook version of which I am reading on my *revolutionary* new iPad.

Don't get me wrong. I think Jobs was brilliant and incredibly productive. The fruit of his labor has proven *inestimably* valuable to me personally. At the end of my October 2011 *I've been thinking*, I added a postscript:

An hour ago, on a device invented by Steve Jobs, I learned of his death. I'm sad. I'm also grateful for how I have benefitted from his genius and life work. Pecking out these thoughts on a MacBook Pro, I confess that I lean hopelessly on the side of the brain that can't remember which side is creative. Jobs opened the technology door for my kind of brain to enter and flourish. Yes, I am grateful.

Having said that, Jobs was a piece of work whose Zen-like results failed to justify his oft-inhumane means. Steve's closest friends and bitterest enemies concurred that he lived much of his life in a "reality distortion field," at the root of which was his belief that the rules did not apply to him. (I'm rewriting that classic heaven joke in my head.)

Insisting on playing by his own rules made it difficult for the legend from Cupertino to discern when he had made a mistake, wronged and hurt others or to admit if he had, let alone to make things right. After recalling Steve's brutal defamation of the mother of his first child, Isaacson writes, "Years later Jobs was remorseful for the way he behaved, one of the few times in his life he admitted as much." Given the abundance of forgiveness he needed for his own hurtful behaviors, Steve did not appear overly quick to forgive those who hurt him. Isaacson notes, "Jobs held grudges, sometimes passionately."

One of the surprises in reading his biography is that I'm seeing more Steve Jobs in me than my penchant for wearing black shirts (a rut into which I fell before he did). Characteristics I share with his lighter side are affirming, if sometimes quirky, like his appreciation for simplicity and beauty, his refusal to sacrifice either form or function, his search for the perfect metaphor¹, and taking years to decide which couch to purchase. With Job's darker side—lets just say that I wish I could leave acting like the arrogant, unforgiving, grudge-holding billionaire completely up to Ashton Kutcher, who today it was announced will play the Hollywood production of the Apple founder's life.

Back to Alexander Pope. I wonder if he was appealing for a different kind of God playing with, "to forgive, divine?"

Benjamin Franklin, another biography Isaacson tackled, crafted an intriguing variation of the maxim: "To err is human, to repent divine, to persist devilish."

Dr. Goldman plays by the rules for all the right reasons. He says, "If I can't come clean and admit my mistakes, how can I share them with my colleagues . . . so they won't do the same thing?" He also makes a case for transparency fostering the creation of backups (think technology) that make it easier to detect the persistent mistakes that humans inevitably make so they can be avoided.

Few have done as well with merging technology and art as the late CEO of the world's most valuable company. Nevertheless, I imagine he could have accomplished still more by blending his complex passion for perfection with simple humility—not unlike the bright humble Canadian ER doc appears to be doing. Then again, I could be wrong.

In any instance, astounding as his accomplishments may be, Steve Jobs (nine years my junior) reminds me that life is short—too short for devilish persistence in always having to be right. And I'm pretty sure I'm right about that.

What do you think?



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¹ "Part of the reason we model our computers on metaphors like the desktop is that we can leverage the experience people already have." Jobs