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### DEALING WITH OUR “TERMINAL” LOSS OF MEMORY

Talking to a friend of mine today, he commented on how we are becoming a “Delete Society”. The idea intrigued me. His contention is that much – if not most – of our communication is now being done, on a daily basis, via e-mail and texting. It is very easy to delete these from our computers and thus from our lives. With every deletion, however, we risk losing important pieces of our existence that, in the past, would be kept and handed down.

Allow me to elaborate. I received an e-mail from my Mother-in-Law stating that my wife’s uncle passed away. The cause, the date and other details were contained in that e-mail. In the past, we would have received a letter that would probably be kept in a box somewhere for future generations to discover. Instead, it is deleted, and subsequently gone forever. For centuries, letters have been handed down that provide not only valuable genealogical information, but snapshots of life as our ancestors knew it. Today, we marvel that our ancestors could easily die from pneumonia, in a world without antibiotics. Tomorrow our grandchildren may marvel that we could die of cancer.

Photographs are even more subject to permanent loss. I know that I often receive photographs of events we have participated in, and they remain attached to e-mails that, unless I am scrupulously careful, end up getting lost or deleted. Even when we do transfer them from the e-mails, they go into a digital file. We currently have hundreds, if not thousands, of anonymous photographs on our computer hard drives. Sometimes I will take a memory stick, load it with the best photographs

and have them printed, and put them in an album with captions. More often than not, however, they sit in a digital file, awaiting the first computer meltdown to come my way, sending the pictures to sleep with the digital fishes. Our parents and grandparents would have taken fewer pictures, had them printed and selected a few to put in an album (picture development and printing used to be a fairly expensive process). Only a natural disaster such as a tornado or a fire could deprive future generations of the pleasure of seeing the lives of their grandparents and great-grandparents evolve.

From this perspective, then, we are going back in time. For most people, tracing lineage or finding snippets of our ancestor’s lives before the 18th century is almost impossible. The vast majority of people led lives of quiet desperation, and simply trying to survive was so all consuming that they had little time or inclination to think of future generations. Besides, almost none of them could read or write anyway. So, for relatively brief period, we have been blessed with photographs on paper and the written word that combine to give us an idea from whence we came. Sadly, we are reverting to a time where so much knowledge was lost between generations. The irony in this is, of course, that we are living in “the age of information”.