



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Learning from Steve Jobs: Connecting the Dots

An icon has passed away. Steve Jobs has certainly left his mark - on an industry, a country, the world. By all accounts he was certainly the definition of visionary, and he seemingly found his own signature way of driving execution at Apple. There's so much that we can learn from him about leadership. However, the story that stands out to me as I've read accounts of his life is this one he told in his [graduation speech at Stanford in 2005](#):

"Because I had dropped out [of college] and didn't have to take the normal classes, I decided to take a calligraphy class to learn how to do this. I learned about serif and san serif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating.

None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. ... Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very clear looking backwards ten years later."

While most of the world marches to the drumbeat of required classes, standardized tests and lock-step career paths, becoming more narrow and linear along the way, one of the biggest innovators (and job creators!) in our country made his success because he simply followed what he found fascinating. He gave himself permission to try new things and trusted somehow that his portfolio of interesting experiences would perhaps lead somewhere new and exciting. The Mac came from someone who had laid down lots of "dots" in his life, and found ways to connect them along the way.

I've seen many clients find great success, appearing very human and very authentic, and finding innovative answers, when they're willing to connect disparate dots in their life to their work. It's the hard-core scientist who supports a confused colleague through a poem he remembered from college, or the leader/musician who powerfully clarifies his role and vision for the organization by metaphorically saying he sees himself as the "conductor of the orchestra".

While college and a degree(s) are likely a stock part of your resume, and you may not be inclined to quit your job to fulfill that long-held desire to be a celebrity chef or join an ashram, how can you intentionally create more "dots", or connect the ones you've laid down, to find new possibilities in your work?

- 1) Engage in a creative practice.** Find an activity that fascinates you and engages you in a new way - whether it's taking a pottery class, flying airplanes, trying stand-up comedy or traveling to an exotic place -- anything that requires that you get out of your comfort zone and find new ways to experience life. You never know where it may lead ten years down the road! And it's all in the name of "work"!
- 2) Look for the next right answer.** DeWitt Jones, a former National Geographic photographer is known for sticking with his shoot, even after he thinks he has "the" shot. When you think you (or your team) have "the" answer to a perplexing problem, or a visionary idea, don't stop there-keep searching for the next right answer. Something tells me that Steve Jobs probably kept that creative conversation going beyond the first good answer, to find more dots to connect!

3) Find new connections in everyday life. Take two very unrelated ideas and see if you can find how they are related. Consider the latest intractable problem you're facing, and just keep asking yourself very lightly throughout your day "how might this inform my thinking?" It could be as you're reading the paper about the latest economic analysis of Greece, watching your son's soccer coach run a practice, reading Dr. Seuss to your kids before bed, or seeing Les Mis at the Kennedy Center. How might each of those activities provide a new perspective on your situation?

Steve Jobs was certainly one-of-a-kind. Much has been written about him, and surely much more will come out, including his biography that is due out in November. My hope is that his spirit of following his fascinations and trusting that the dots will connect is a legacy that will live on, for the sake of our economy and our humanity.

- Pam Krulitz