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It's Time to Learn to Think Like Steve Jobs

Rahm Emanuel should beckon America's army of grim, cost-cutting politicians to two Chicago spots — eight miles apart and seemingly with nothing in com-

JAMES WARREN common — to remind them about something forgotten in this age of scarcity: imagination.

I thought about a downtown video sculpture and a nondescript white frame house in a working-class Latino neighborhood after hearing of the health-related resignation of Steve Jobs as chief executive of Apple Inc.

Mr. Jobs was routinely likened to Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. Those comparisons may miss the mark since he's perhaps more akin to the American icon born in that Northwest Side two-flat, which bears no mention of him: Walt Disney.

The morning after Mr. Jobs's announcement, I watched our 2-year-old son lying on the kitchen floor and adroitly moving a finger here, a finger there, using an iPad's touch screen to find a Thomas the Train video and the wildly popular Angry Birds puzzle video game.

He is captivated by a product whose message is the same as that of Mr. Jobs's Macintosh, iPod and iPhone — anything is possible. It's a legacy of Mr. Disney, who, even in the darkest days of the Depression, created an alternative world of pleasure via characters like Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Pluto and Donald Duck.

Mr. Jobs disdains most consumer research, like focus groups, since he believes that we don't really know what we want. He goes with his gut, unlike a research-driven political class obsessed with giving citizens what they claim to desire.

It's how he expanded Mr. Disney's notion of "imagineering" from movie houses and television to desktops, telephones and touch-screen tablets. Their democratic essence crosses demographic and ideological lines: products that Fox News Channel and MSNBC die-hards can agree on.

Sadly, politicians' inclinations to think small are accentuated as revenues decline. They can even turn callous, as did Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the House majority leader, when he argued against emergency aid for victims of Hurricane Irene unless offset by dollar-for-dollar cuts elsewhere.

If one can't help neighbors in need, it doesn't speak well of figuring out the future. Meanwhile, Mr. Jobs's notion of the "insanely great" need not be left to private-sector visionaries.

The Disney house, built by Walt's father, a carpenter, in 1892, is near the corner of Tripp

Street and Palmer Avenue in Hermosa Park. There's an older couple on the second floor and an older lady and her grandson on the first. It's owned by Barbara Popovic, a journalist, and her husband.

Ms. Popovic is executive director of Chicago Access Network Television (CAN TV) and its five local public access channels. It's financed by the city's franchise cable operators and represents a nifty tool of creative expression for many thousands. New York City just announced a strong deal for its sister public access centers there, underscoring the value in which they're held.

But it's down to the wire on a new deal for CAN TV with RCN, one of Chicago's cable providers, that will set the stage for other franchise deals this decade.

Cable revenue has soared despite the recession, but financing for CAN TV, whose budget is \$2 million, has declined. The RCN renewal is expected before the City Council shortly and the public could be shortchanged.

It's a coincidence that the Disney home is owned by someone with an appreciation of the nexus between public financing and creativity. But it's no coincidence

*Walt Disney's house,
a video sculpture and
the joys of believing
in infinite possibility.*

that my favorite public space, Millennium Park, epitomizes the bond and is a huge draw.

On a hot summer day, can you top the delight of the once-disputed Crown Fountain by the Catalan artist Jaume Plensa?

Imagine if he'd asked focus groups about spending government money on a \$17 million interactive art-video sculpture with water cascading down two 50-foot-tall glass brick towers onto a black granite reflecting pool.

On Thursday afternoon, the squeals of delight were unrelenting. Dozens of kids joyfully awaited the parsing of lips on the facial images and the pouring down of water.

Three of them — a blond girl, a black boy and a Latino boy, who clearly had not known one another before — frolicked together underneath one tower. They danced with their palms facing toward the sky, then slid onto the granite floor on their backs and flapped their feet in unison in the inch-high pool.

It was magic and sparkle and a reminder that even amid awful challenges, we need to invest in joy.

The scene was so Disney.