

YOU HAVE TO BE HUMAN

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If I'm honest I've been feeling hopeless lately. Sometimes I feel like giving up. What's the point of writing when AI will soon automate the book I just spent years on, and generate my blog posts faster than I ever could? What's the point of improving at anything? There is nothing impressive left to do or to learn. This is all there is, staring down the barrel of a life spent inputting and prompting. It feels like the worst time to try.

Then I started thinking about the next generation, and how bad that feeling must be. Why learn to drive when self-driving cars are coming. Why bother to code or start a company. Why learn to draw, why practice guitar, why study photography, why struggle through academic research. But as I thought about this happening in every direction, all at once, it began to look like an opportunity. When so few seem interested in being a person, isn't that the best time to be one? Maybe this is a moment for optimism. You just have to be human.

You have to speak like a human, for a start. When everyone else is grinding out birthday messages and apologies and love letters with AI, use your voice. Stumble over your words, get them jumbled. Write a wedding speech or a birthday toast that rambles and goes off track and makes people laugh and frown and remember. Put words together that don't fit or perfectly flow, get your metaphors tangled and grammar confused. As everyone generates the same college essays and job applications, say something real, put something on the line. In an automated world where everything is so bland and boring, your messages and vows and condolences and eulogies will glimmer, will glow with their humanity. There's never been a better time to touch the hearts of people, you just have to be human.

When so few seem interested in being a person, isn't that the best time to be one? Maybe this is a moment for optimism. You just have to be human. Think like a human, too. Have your own opinions, convictions, beliefs you are brave enough to defend. Because along with this robotic voice, it feels as if everyone has this agreeableness now too, this neutered way of seeing the world. Nobody wants to be distinctive, nobody wants to risk disapproval. So when everyone is getting these fawning, flattering responses from AI bots, be sincere. Be sceptical, critical, have preferences and judgements. Stand up for good art and good ideas and good choices. I am so bored of hearing that's valid! and you do you! Not just from AI bots but from people, human beings, those who have blunted themselves and their beliefs. It's so dull, this refusal to say anything; I'm desperate for human judgement, starving for taste and conviction. Develop your own opinions, especially if you're young; don't outsource your thinking before you've even lived, don't try to win approval at the expense of being human. You won't be liked by everyone but that's the point, no human ever has been. Not everyone will get you, you won't be for everyone, but you will be someone. Act like a human too! To have your own voice you need to venture out into the world. You need to take risks and try things, you need experiences and adventures. AI has to churn out the observations and opinions of other people, of a world it has never touched or experienced. You don't have to do the same. So go outside, say yes to things, be scared and excited and uncomfortable. Feel your hands shake before you speak, your legs ache after a long day, your face flush when asking her out. Experience it all, the real world with all your senses, the fear of getting lost, the relief of finding your way, the hands of another person. Look people in the eye and learn about the world from living in it.

This is very important for the next generation, because mine was taught to do the opposite. We became automated ourselves. We learned to speak like robots, think like robots, act like robots. We hid our opinions, for fear of upsetting anyone. We affected the agreeable robot voice, to accommodate everyone. We stayed inside more than any generation before us, to avoid risking anything. We were warned that strong convictions were dangerous, that anything we said or did could be held against us. We grew up in a culture that was both validating and vicious: sycophantic and yet willing to slice us apart in a second for having the wrong opinion or making a mistake, to never let us forget. So we played it safe, convinced we could not step out of line, could not have our own thoughts, could not feel too much.

We became less human. We became anxious and insecure, afraid to say or do the wrong thing, unable to live. Constantly monitoring and managing ourselves, protecting our personal brands, making sure we were never too contradictory or confusing. And we never realized there was something more at stake, more than the risk of offending, more than the risk of getting things wrong, a danger of becoming like bots, automated and standardized. Now here we are, many of us functioning like autocomplete, capable of thinking and saying only the most acceptable and predictable things.

Now it feels unfair—now that we are rapidly approaching times when it is necessary to know how to be human. Times when the most ordinary human things will seem extraordinary. After years of being trained out of our humanity, these are times when it will be the most valuable thing about us again, the rarest and most prized possession, if you managed to maintain it. And now we need to be human if we want to compete.

Nobody is remembered for being robotic and predictable, for thinking and sounding the same as everyone else. Sure you can prompt and generate your words and beliefs but you will do nothing lasting, build nothing of consequence. And I refuse to believe that relying on AI is an advantage; they keep saying we will be left behind if we stay human, but maybe I want to be left behind from a life spent delegating my thoughts and feelings and decisions to machines.

So write, think, live. Get hurt and rejected and feel it in your gut and sort of like that horrible feeling because at least you're alive, you're here. I realize now that I want to be real. I don't want to be harmless, I want to be human, I want to say things that bother people and move people and confuse people; I want to start sentences that can't be autocompleted because even I don't know where they're going. I want to learn and offend and regret and grow. I want to be interesting, irritating, irreplaceable. I want to get things wrong and apologize and sometimes I want my opinions to be contradictory and incomplete because I am feeling my way through this world and I am not a machine with all the answers. I want to try and be seen trying, to be a person you can't perfectly map out and make sense of, what good am I otherwise, what am I otherwise.

So to the next generation: This is your opportunity. The best defence you have is being human. Write in a way AI can't imitate. Come up with ideas it couldn't generate. Believe in something when bots can't believe in anything. Speak from the heart because you have one and AI doesn't. Don't live on screens because it's the one thing AI has to do that you don't. Venture into the real world, as much as you possibly can, because it's your advantage, a place you have actually felt and touched. Do things that make your heart pound. Feel and love and risk. The future belongs to those who can.

Who knows what's going to happen to writing, to my craft. But what I do know, what we all know, is how to be a person. You can try, you can create, you can impress, you can achieve. You only have to be human.