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# The Extraordinary Human

*What It Means to Be Fully Human in the Time of AI*

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We have been handed a strange and quietly thrilling moment. AI has arrived, and it is very good at the work we spent our careers and lives learning to do well. It drafts, summarizes, analyzes, optimizes, and so much more, and it does it faster than we can, across a widening set of domains. We find ourselves facing the question that is in boardrooms, at dinner tables, and in the news: *if the AI can do the work, what is left for us?*

I want to resist the two answers that arrive most easily. One says the future will be frictionless; the other says it will be catastrophic. Both are forms of relief, and both let us off the hook of thinking more deeply. Our colleague Will Samson has done us the service of refusing both. He argues, rightly, that nothing about these systems is artificial. They are built from accumulated human expression, and what they return to us is a mirror. When we fear AI, we are partly fearing an amplified reflection of ourselves.

If AI is a mirror, what do we see when we look in the mirror? My thinking, as a life practitioner who has spent many years in the mountains, on the trails, and building companies, is this: AI is not here to replace humans. It is here to reveal the human. It may be the most interesting technology we have ever built that can expose capacities we have not yet used.

## What Extraordinary Actually Is

The dictionary defines extraordinary as something that is far beyond what is usual or regular. I add to the definition that which has not yet been seen or experienced. It is a relative measure, taken at a given moment, against what we currently do and know. We rarely need it explained to us. We recognize it the instant it appears. But to understand where it comes from, and how to call it forward on purpose, it helps to understand something about how we are built.

The human system is a predictive system designed to reveal what it needs to know and how to operate in the world as it currently exists. Thus, the brain processes at the level of detail the life being lived requires, and little more. This is not a limitation imposed from outside. It is efficiency. The system does not waste energy on surfacing capabilities that the current environment does not require. Which means ordinary is not a failure or a lesser state. Ordinary is the system meeting its

conditions precisely. Extraordinary happens when the conditions of life change and something that the current world did not require comes into focus. It is not a different kind of person. It is the same person, met by a condition that asks for more. We are, each of us, a reservoir of capacity and capability, most of it unrevealed, waiting for what will call it forward.

**The Myth We Are Leaving Behind**

To understand what AI reveals, we first have to consider what it exposes. For most of the modern era, we built our identities on our individual performance. We learned to define ourselves by the output we produced, how fast, how visibly, and how much more than the year before. This is the story I lived inside for decades, and I wrote a whole book celebrating it before I understood what it was costing me. Achievement became a shared religion. We worshipped progress, tithed our hours, and measured our worth by the scoreboard.

The unsettling thing about AI is not that it threatens this performance; it is that it perfects it. AI takes a defined task and executes it better and faster than any human ever could, improving without rest, complaint, or doubt. If our worth is only linked to our output, then AI is the more worthy worker. This appears to be the source of the anxiety underneath all the headlines. We built our sense of self on exactly the ground AI can occupy most completely.

To move from here, we need to reframe the perception of AI. AI does not take something essential from us. It has called the bluff of a story we should never have believed in the first place. The performance was never the point. It was the costume. The great gift hidden inside this disruption is that it hands us back the very capacities the achievement culture spent years teaching us to ignore. Three of them are the mechanisms by which the reservoir opens.

**Wonder, Curiosity, and the Adaptation**

Extraordinary does not arrive all at once. It comes from a sequence that begins with wonder. **Wonder** is the faculty that notices that something might be possible before there is any reason to believe it. It is neither optimism nor a plan. It is the small, almost involuntary opening that says, what if. I once read about a man hallucinating on the side of a road seventy miles into a race through Death Valley. Instead of recoiling, something in me quietly wondered what kind of person could finish a race like that. Years later, I finished the same race. Wonder is the crack of light. It is the first sign that the current frame is not the only one.

**Curiosity** is what turns wonder into motion. Wonder notices the possibility; curiosity walks toward it. This is the faculty that the optimized life punishes most efficiently, because curiosity is inefficient by design. It meanders, asks questions with no return on investment, and follows a thread with no guarantee it leads anywhere. And yet it is the only thing that carries us across the distance between glimpsing a new possibility and standing inside it. The reservoir does not open for the one who

merely wonders. It opens for the one curious enough to keep moving toward what they cannot yet see.

And **adaptation** is where the sequence completes. Wonder notices, curiosity moves, and adaptation happens when moving toward requires us to become something we have not yet been. It is wonder and curiosity expressed not as feeling but as transformation, the willingness to be changed by what we are moving toward. This is the part AI cannot reach.

**Performance Is What a Machine Does. Adaptation Is What a Human Is.**

AI performs. It optimizes toward a goal it did not choose and cannot question. It improves within the boundaries it was given, doing the same thing better every time, but it cannot decide, in the middle of the work, that the work itself should change. It has no body that has lived through uncertainty, no nervous system that has accumulated the felt sense of a thousand situations, no capacity to be changed by what it encounters. It was not built to change. It was built to perform.

Adaptation is the opposite movement. It is the capacity to sense, often before any evidence supports it, that the path forward runs in a direction no one has yet endeavored to go. The clearest instance in my own work came at the frontier of the technology itself. We had built an autonomous platform capable of doing what a human salesperson does, without the human. The safe and defensible wisdom of the industry was to keep a person in the loop. We tried it. We placed the hybrid model beside the fully autonomous one, and the old model simply collapsed. The decision that followed did not arrive at the end of a chain of reasoning. It arrived as recognition, a signal that came through clean, and the only remaining question was whether we would trust it enough to act. We went all in.

The rise of AI, rather than making us obsolete, frees us to do the one thing it cannot. The machine performs so that the human can adapt. It handles the defined task so we can return to the undefined, the work of describing a path where none has been drawn and walking into it before the map exists. Wonder, curiosity, and adaptation are not soft virtues we fall back on once AI takes the real work. They are the real work. They are how the next layer of the human gets revealed.

**The Energy We Have Not Yet Felt**

History offers a familiar version of this. Every shift in tools has called forth capacity the prior world never required, and in hindsight, we can always see what was extraordinary. The point is a bit more subtle than a better plow or a faster computer. What we are finding is that there is a kind of energy system most of us have barely touched, and the era ahead may finally ask us to.

Most of what we call energy is generated. It is effort, will, and discipline. It has a source, and therefore a limit. It depletes, and it requires recovery to recharge. The person running on generated energy alone is conscious of their reserves and can feel when they are low. But there is a second kind, and it behaves differently. It does not originate in us. It moves through us. I learned this not in a seminar but on a mountain, three hundred meters below a summit, when a guide who had spent his life in

the Himalaya said three words, " Let's go now", and we ran down the mountain, and minutes later, the rock we had been standing on was at the center of an electrical storm. He had not generated that knowledge. He had become quiet enough to receive what was already moving through him. He was, in the most literal and the most philosophical sense, a lightning rod.

The phrase that has organized my thinking since then is through me, not from me. The deepest clarity I have known did not come from me. It moved through me, and the real work was to become clear enough to conduct it. This is not mysticism, and it asks for no special belief. It is attunement, and most of us have felt it in entirely ordinary moments. The conversation where you said exactly the right thing without knowing what you'd say. The decision that settled before the analysis was finished. These are not coincidences. They are the deeper intelligence announcing itself, and they are data about a capacity we have, on the whole, left unrevealed.

Here is why this matters in the moment before us. We tend to assume we are operating near the ceiling of our capabilities. We are not. We are an unlimited reservoir of capacity and capability, and the AI era that is now beginning is a new condition of immense force, and I suspect it will require energy systems we have not yet felt. New ways of working and communicating. Forms of attention and conduction the optimized life had no use for. Models not yet built. AI is the pressure and the invitation at once. The fear says it will strip away our humanity and leave us with less. The fear has it backward. By taking up the generated, repeatable, performable work, AI clears the channel for the conducted work that only a human can do. We do not protect our humanity by holding the machine at a distance. We discover the next layer of it by becoming clear enough to receive what the moment is ready to move through us.

**The Price of Becoming Extraordinary**

There is a challenge when we let the reservoir flow. We have to be willing, at some level, to be a beginner again. I had run more than thirty marathons before my first trail race, and I assumed the only new variable was time. The trail made a beginner of me inside the first hour. The accomplishment I brought from the road was real, and it was also the thing most in my way. My expertise wanted to apply itself to conditions it did not fit. This is precisely the threshold the age of AI places in front of every accomplished person. Our hard-won competence, the very thing that earned us our seat, can become the thing most in our way. The corridor of achievement trains us to be the ones who know and teach us that beginning again is a step backward. The opposite is true. The willingness to be a beginner is the price of the next layer of who we can become, and the ones who thrive will not be those who cling hardest to what made us successful, but those willing to set the expertise down and stand in the discomfort of not knowing, long enough for a new capacity to develop.

We might assume we are operating near the ceiling of our capabilities, but we are not. My own life has been a series of unlocks, in which shifts in conditions forced a breakthrough from ordinary to

extraordinary. My first unlock was **mindset**, the realization that the boundaries we see are rarely the boundaries that exist. That was the focus of my first book, an ordinary Joe's guide to the extraordinary. The second unlock was **health and performance**, learning to align the physical and mental systems to build a purpose-driven life. That became *Living Intentionally*.
And now, we stand before the third and most profound unlock: **Artificial Intelligence**. This moment is not a conclusion; it is an awakening. By taking up the generated, repeatable, performable work, AI is forcing us to stop trying to be flawed, high-speed generators and invites us to claim our agency as brilliant conductors. It pushes us *Beyond the Horizon of Self*, the exact moment we move to the extraordinary because the environment is challenging us to do so.

**Flourishing, Not Abundance**

So, I find myself in agreement with Will and moving another step forward. AI is a mirror, yes. But it has done something more useful than reflect us. It is giving us the opportunity to leave behind the performance we mistook for our worth, and in doing so, it has cleared the ground. Standing on that cleared ground, the real question is no longer whether AI will become human. It is whether we will. But we must be incredibly vigilant, because a shallow version of the AI story is everywhere right now. It is a story solely about abundance, more output, more efficiency, more produced by fewer hands. If that is all this moment delivers, we will not have flourished. We will have been made comfortable, and comfort is the condition under which capacity stays unrevealed. The danger is not that the machine becomes cruel. It is that it becomes so capable, and we are so relieved, that we hand over not only the work but the wondering, the curiosity, the judgment, the conducting, the willingness to be changed. That is how a species becomes, in the end, well-kept pets of its own tools. Cared for, optimized, and quietly diminished.

The alternative is not to compete with AI, which is a race mostly lost and the wrong race. The alternative is to flourish, in the old and demanding sense of that word. To use what is most essentially human, sustained over time, until it becomes a way of being. And here the story and this moment converge on something I take seriously. Flourishing of this kind is not solitary. The clarity that moves through us moves through us together. The energy I have been describing is conducted in relationship, not generated in isolation. Which means the alignment this moment asks for is not primarily technical. It is human. Collaboration, cooperation, and shared becoming are not pleasantries laid over the real work. They are the conditions under which the reservoir opens at the scale this era requires. We rise into the next layer of what we are with one another, conducting together what no one of us could generate alone, or we do not rise into it at all.

That is the conversation to have. Not a defense of the human against AI, but an invitation past abundance toward flourishing. Extraordinary, remember, is simply that which has not yet been seen, the same human met by a condition that finally asks for more. AI is that condition. The reservoir is full, and it always was. This strange and thrilling moment is, at last, the one that asks us to reveal it, and to reveal it together.