

“I’m Not a Robot”

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Unitarian Church of Montpelier

April 14, 2024

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

As a child growing up in Baku, Azerbaijan, Garry Kasparov loved to play chess. He not only loved it. He was good at it. By the age of seven, he was recognized as a chess prodigy. He started competing in chess tournaments at a young age, and in 1985 at the age of 22, he became the youngest-ever world chess champion. Kasparov’s rise as a chess player paralleled the rise of artificial intelligence and chess-playing computers in particular.

A little more than a decade after becoming the then youngest world chess champion, Kasparov sat down for a match against a chess-playing supercomputer dubbed Deep Blue. In the first match, Kasparov outwitted Deep Blue switching strategies mid-game and was victorious. Score one for the human.

They played again the following year in 1997, and this time Kasparov’s “wait and see” approach did not work in his favor. In just one hour, Deep Blue had captured Kasparov’s queen and Kasparov conceded defeat thus ending the match resulting in the first time a computer defeated a reigning world chess champion under tournament conditions. Score one for AI.

Many advancements in artificial intelligence have taken place in the decades since that match up. Today, we find ourselves swimming in new waters where AI’s capabilities have begun to outpace our human capacity to clearly apply moral and ethical frameworks to this technology or even to fully understand what it is we are creating.

If you’re not familiar with what artificial intelligence is, let me give a simple definition. Artificial intelligence is “the simulation of human intelligence processes by machines, especially computer systems.”¹ The cognitive functions that AI is designed to simulate include: learning, reasoning, self-correction, and creativity.

There are many types of AI and ways that it is being applied today in our everyday life and in very specialized settings.

¹ <https://www.techtarget.com/searchenterpriseai/definition/AI-Artificial-Intelligence>

There are ChatBots that show up on websites asking if you need assistance, or computerized customer service “agents” that you might sometimes speak to when you’re trying to sort out a cable bill or change a flight reservation.

There are assistive devices you can talk to at home that will respond when you ask it to play your favorite song or turn on the news.

At an appointment with my primary care provider recently, she asked if I would be okay with her testing out a new AI program designed to listen in and take notes on the patient’s chart after the appointment so that the provider can be more focused on their patient. After asking some questions about privacy, I gave my consent.

A less benevolent use of AI is the malware bot used to infiltrate user accounts and steal personal information. They are so ubiquitous on the internet that we often have to check the little box at the bottom of an online form to confirm that you are not a robot. (I can stand here today and tell you confidently without identifying any traffic lights or bicycles that I am not a robot.)

Some of my colleagues recently had a discussion about the merits and ethical challenges of utilizing AI for assistance with sermon preparation. In particular, they were discussing the use of ChatGPT which is a tool that draws upon an incredibly large amount of data to respond to written tasks you give it in a conversational manner.

One person shared how it felt like cheating to ask ChatGPT to present a simplified explanation for a complex concept they wanted to include in their sermon. Another person shared how helpful it has been to have a tool that can assist in organizing their thoughts given certain learning disabilities they have. I don’t have a single, decisive conclusion about this yet, and I’m not sure I ever will. But, I am fascinated by the ways we are experimenting with these tools especially to amplify and support how we communicate with one another.

Let’s do an experiment together now. I read some of your responses earlier to the question of what you would put into a sermon about interdependence, our worship theme for the month of April. You said some beautiful and profound things.

Let’s see what ChatGPT would say. [*Use laptop to go onto ChatGPT and ask it to write a Unitarian Universalist sermon on interdependence.*]

So, you might be wondering whether any of this sermon that I am delivering to you this morning was written by AI. Except for what I just read off the OpenAI website, my sermon today has been

produced using my own natural intelligence alone though I have certainly consulted many resources through books and articles and conversations with other people as well as my own life experiences to compose what I am presenting to you right now.

Artificial intelligence, however, has contributed to this service by way of a few of the phrases incorporated into my opening words which were generated when asking ChatGPT to write an opening for a Unitarian Universalist service on the theme of interdependence. And, you might have noticed the image in your order of service. It is a multi-colored rectangle with shades of blue and orange in the background and lines, smaller squares, and rectangles creating a pattern, kind of like a neural network. This image was created by generative AI when I gave it the description for this worship service as a prompt.

I realize much of this might be new to some of you, so let me give you a few moments to let this information settle. I invite you to notice your response to what I have shared with you so far. Is it curiosity? Excitement? Worry? Confusion?

I think many of us realize that this moment we are in could be a major turning point. At the same time, we're not sure where that turning point is leading.

As a preacher and pastor, what I am interested in even more so than the technology itself is our human response to it. What do we make of this moment we are living in? How will we use the technological powers we are in the midst of creating? How does artificial intelligence change our relationships and interdependence with one another, human to human, as well as our dependence on technology?

Samuel Wells, editor of The Christian Century, says that human responses to AI fall into three groups: "Not on Your Life," "Yes, Please," and "Yes, but."² What he describes tracks pretty well with what I've observed within my own circles, particularly the first and last groupings.

The "Not on Your Life" people imagine artificial intelligence reaching a point of development where it has the ability to reproduce itself and inevitably dominates human civilization. A few weeks ago a young person in our congregation shared the concern during our candle lighting time that AI robots could take over the world. There were a few chuckles when he said this, however this is a very real and felt concern that many people hold.

² Samuel Wells, "Faith, hope, love and AI," Christian Century, February 16, 2024, <https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/faith-hope-love-and-ai>

On the other end of the spectrum of responses are the “Yes, Please” people. The story for the “Yes, Please” crowd is that humans will be able to utilize artificial intelligence to overcome all limitations. AI is an extension of human mastery over our entire material existence and beyond.

And, then perhaps somewhere in the middle there is the “Yes, but” response. This perspective is not fundamentally opposed to or in favor of artificial intelligence, however one important piece of the story from this perspective is how all new technologies tend to amplify power differentials and inequities that are already present in the world, and therefore we ought to be cautious.

And, I’m certain there are responses that fit in and around all three of these.

One of the strongest pushbacks against AI has been coming from the world of journalism. Several news organizations have recently filed lawsuits against OpenAI claiming the tech company had used their copyrighted stories to train ChatGPT without seeking permission or offering compensation.

Most higher education institutions have now developed policies on the appropriate use of generative AI as instructors grapple with how to evaluate students’ work and students grapple with the veracity of the information they are finding when they use these tools.

At the heart of these criticisms and concerns is the question of what is real. Is there any authenticity to words, images, or music that is generated by human-programmed artificial intelligence?

The creative and generative power we humans possess is surely one of our gifts. That we can create poetry and music and art and design planes and build engines is a miracle of life. That we can then share these things with others and foster connections and relationships among us is another miracle of life.

Our grappling with the value and pitfalls of artificial intelligence brings us closer to the question of what really makes us human and what about being human is irreplaceable.

While the technology we develop can do some cool things and maybe even make life easier in some regards, there is also so much that we experience that is fulfilling and enlivening as we live it through our brains and bodies just as they are.

Rhonda Fabian, editor of Kosmos Quarterly, writes: “Here’s what AI does not ‘know’: the transformational experience of beauty, the felt thrill of creativity, languages of the wind, the voluptuousness of the sea, the tree-ing of trees, the bee-ing of bees, the gesture of the giraffe, the voice of the beloved, scent of the lilac, lift of the seabird, laughter of women working, smell of

snow, a lover's caress, the teeming soil, moonlight's mystery, the pain of labor and joy of birth, shamanic vision, insight, love...freedom itself."³

What a thing to be able to be in this world that offers us beauty, joy, pain, and love in every moment, in every place, in this very body.

And, what a thing to be in a world where we also express our ingenuity, creativity, and innovation in continuously sophisticated ways that stretch our understanding of what it means to be in this moment, in this place, and in this body.

We humans have many powerful capabilities. To create and to destroy. To love and to hate. To help and to harm.

I believe our greatest power is one we encounter in this sanctuary every week. The human power and intelligence of forming, nurturing, and restoring relationships in a community of interdependence and mutuality.

Whatever may lie ahead, however we continue to tinker and invent and reach beyond the boundaries of even our own mental capacities, may we know real love, real care, and real wonder.

May we know what is truly at the heart of this life and give thanks.

So may it be.

³ https://www.kosmosjournal.org/kj_article/the-four-freedoms-and-artificial-intelligence/