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"Alternative Intelligences"
A Sermon by the Rev. Alex Jensen
UU Congregation of Grand Traverse
Sunday, December 10, 2023

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As I begin today's sermon, I want to invite you to picture that you are in an old, ancient library where there are books of every size, seam, and color lining the shelves from floor to ceiling. The library is dimly lit with glowing lights, and it's not the best cataloged... Though you figure just about everything under the sun must be in here... Think like a really disorganized Library of Congress!

At a desk, reading by the fire is a helpful librarian who has read each and every book in this collection. Whereas you might think it impossible to know or recall from memory every single title, text, or book, this librarian can do it in a heartbeat. The librarian has even read countless things beyond this library as well and can tell you what they've learned. You go up to this librarian with what you're looking for: a question, a piece of information, an idea: how to bake the best chocolate chip cookies, for example.

This librarian, in an instant, pulls out a hand-written report, seemingly written just for you, all about baking chocolate chip cookies. The librarian even has newer ideas and insights for chocolate chip cookies that are drawn from many other recipe books and blogs, even when all of this information isn't yet found all in the one, same place.

This, my friends, is what artificial intelligence is and how it functions; at least with the popular program and AI tool known as ChatGPT.[1] While many of us have seen cautionary tales and sci-fi films like *Terminator, I-Robot, Blade Runner*, or even the recent AI thriller movie, *M3gan*–the number 3 for an "E" in her name–artificial intelligence itself is truly about imitation. It's about simulating what we experience as "human" intelligence and creating new tools and processes that improve how we complete tasks and gather information.

When I think about these elements of imitation and simulation, I'm reminded of a story that two of my former ministers told me, the Revs. Elaine and Axel Gehrmann of the UU Church of the Monterey Peninsula. They told me about a time back in 2017 when they visited Wittenberg, Germany for Reformation 500; celebrating 500 years since Martin Luther's 95 theses. While they were there, they met a robot affectionately named "BlessU-2" that offered visitors the chance for a blessing or a prayer, offered up by this robotic priest.[2] *How many of you would be brave enough to take a blessing from a robot priest?*

Offering blessings across five languages, Axel and Elaine showed me a video they took of how the priest offered them many choices for the blessing... Offering it in either a male or female voice; offering different kinds of blessings, for grief, encouragement, and community. The sounds of fans and machines whirring, the robot priest then raised up its arms high and blessed them, even offering them a print-out of the prayer. Needless to say, this gives me and other clergy some questions around job security if this whole robot priest thing really takes on!

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[1] "ChatGPT", *OpenAI*.
[2] "Robot priest unveiled in Germany to mark 500 years since Reformation", by Harriet Sherwood, *The Guardian*.

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Though, at least for now, it really hasn't taken on. Watching this video of this robotic prayer, I experienced this feeling in my gut that's hard to describe. A feeling of sadness, perhaps even loneliness, with how a robot blessing still isn't the same thing as genuine, authentic human presence. How as much as they can imitate human connection, there's still something missing here that robots and machines can't imitate, at least for now... The knowledge that behind the robot lies only an emptiness; not a connection with another living, breathing being. I think it's safe to say that you can't quite replace that, no matter how many robotic blessings a robot priest can bestow.

This morning, I'm wondering if we can broaden our exploration of artificial intelligence–known as AI–into a conversation on *alternative* intelligence. Rather than seeing it as a means to an end, with AI fully replacing or imitating our humanity, seeing how AI might present us with another set of tools for enhancing our human experience. We human beings have an innate drive to solve problems; to search for new tools and information that helps us to improve our lives and our ways of living. What are some ways that we might think outside the box here? What if we approached AI as simply another tool in our quest to solve problems and improve qualities of life?

I want to give you an example of what I mean by thinking outside the box and turning to what I'd call "alternative" intelligence. Take, for example, slime molds and how researchers used mold to simulate the plotting of Tokyo's subway and rail systems.[3] It turns out that slime molds and human beings have something in common: we want to take the shortest path and spend the least amount of energy doing it!

When researchers added areas of food for the mold across a map of Japan, almost like important points like cities and rail stations, the mold, interestingly, replicated the routes and railways with a high amount of accuracy. This *brainless* tool–we're taking a bunch of mold and slime–was able to bring an intelligence of sorts to mapping out an efficient rail system, even offering some suggestions for improvement of some routes that could be more direct. In other words, slime molds can build highly efficient networks without expending human resources or even consulting with a whole planning board! Pretty remarkable!

In this case, "intelligence" does not signify a replica of human intelligence. Rather, it shows us a turning toward intelligence that is even beyond our grasp and yet found all across nature. You can see another example of this in how forests of trees grow, and their remarkable similarity to neural networks in the human brain. The word "dendrite" for brain cell comes from the Greek word *Dendron* meaning "tree".[4]

It turns out that scientists are starting to uncover how trees have their own sort of "nervous system" too, much like the human brain. Miles of roots, growth, and mycelium that facilitate communication, memory, and even learning amongst the trees. Alternative intelligence might be a more apt concept than we initially thought.

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[3] "Slime mold validates efficiency of Tokyo rail network", by Katherine Harmon, *The Scientific American.*
[4] "Exploring The Underground Network of Trees: The Nervous System of the Forest", by Valentina Lagomarsino, *The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University.*

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I think we human beings, in the case of AI, are a bit too self-absorbed. We fear an imitation of what we know as human intelligence all the while we are surrounded in a world, a universe of intelligence and unfolding wisdom: the brilliance of nature; the lessons of the stars on our origins and the universe's beginnings. How might this conversation really not even be about us? How much might it be about revealing the intelligence and wisdom that already abides, all around us? Is AI one such tool that can help reveal this intelligence, like a librarian in a vast, cosmic library, beyond even human limits?

I want to acknowledge and turn to the great many fears we have when it comes to AI. The fears of great economic shifts and the loss of jobs. The ways that new images and information can be generated at staggering speeds. Growing amounts of disinformation and the creation of false images and articles that spread like wildfire. Even the most sensational of our fears, with a complete AI takeover and the total destruction of humanity.

We know that there are real fears that have come with the increased use of AI: increasing cyberattacks and scams that target innocent people. Disinformation and propaganda that has taken social media by storm, distorting our reality and what we know to be true. They now have AI image and video tools that can generate any possible image you can imagine, whether you want to see a futuristic world with streets made of pepperoni pizza… or to generate a false video of a politician or leader, making certain statements that they did not actually make.

AI is even changing the landscape of education, most acutely in the ways students learn and develop their writing. You've heard how Socrates famously warned against writing itself; how it would create forgetfulness in the souls of learners.[5] We've having a whole new conversation about writing today…

As a teacher or a professor, you now have to have timed writing assignments in class in order to be sure that AI or a computer did not write that seven-page essay on *War and Peace*. They even have tools now for not just checking whether an essay was AI-generated… But also tools to make AI writings even more difficult to detect. How will human beings learn to write? To express their inner voice and thoughts? Will there be a need or even a desire for this moving forward?

This is new and scary terrain. We quite simply are not ready for this future, just like we haven't been ready with the advents of new technologies before. The Reading that Dan offered today shows us a history of technology scares and how we seem to have similar fears with the rise of each new technology. My favorite of these fears is from a French statesman in the 1700s who warned against getting our news from the printed page. How it socially isolated readers and detracted from the spiritually uplifting experience of getting your news right from the pulpit![6]

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[5] "Don't Touch That Dial! A history of media technology scares, from the printing press to Facebook", by Vaughan Bell, *SlateGroup*.
[6] "Don't Touch That Dial! A history of media technology scares, from the printing press to Facebook", by Vaughan Bell, *SlateGroup*.

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I won't be wearing my *CNN* or *Fox News* hats anytime soon… Maybe my *NPR* hat… (That's a "UUs love *NPR*" joke…)

All of this is to say that with the creation of each new technology and tool, we've developed similar fears. we actually *have* been here before. We have genuine considerations for how the world will shift and how our lives will be different by these advancing technologies. And yet, somehow, the worst of our fears and imaginings are never realized. There is no total takeover or destruction of humanity, even if there could be something in the future to come that makes this feel more and more inevitable.

What's needed now is confronting our fears; to actually look at the great, big AI "boogeyman" and to see how it might actually prove an asset, an *aid* to human intelligence, but not a *replacement*. We need to seize the creative opportunity in alternative forms of intelligence and to be willing to help shape it, mold it, and even rein it in with its potential downsides.

I invite us to remember the wisdom of ages and sages: That what has been is what will be. That what has been done is what will be done. That there is nothing new under the sun.[7] We either can engage these alternative forms of intelligence, or we resign their use to those who would use them for harm or great evil.

A pragmatic approach is that AI is here to stay, whether we like it, are comfortable using it, or would rather just ignore it. We are at a pivotal time when we need to really engage these tools for broad and new horizons. How might we welcome in these new forms of intelligence, these new tools, rather than being too afraid to use them?

Friends, I want to assure you that there is something intrinsic and irreplaceable about our humanity. That no matter how advanced these technologies become, how could anything even verge on replacing the *irreplaceable* you and me: the vastness of our human experiences and how we come to know and encounter the world?

I don't think anything can replace the parallel intelligence that is the human condition and experience. This is an intelligence that, like networks of trees and slime molds, brings its own wisdom and truths. Even after a successful attempt of a computer deceiving a human being via what we know as the "The Turing Test", a computer can only go as far as *mimicking* our humanity.[8] Going beyond *thinking* like a human being, a computer still needs to cover *experiencing*, *witnessing* as a human being… Something that can never fully be created or replaced, but simply just is…

To close, I want to invite you to experience exactly what it is I mean by the "irreplaceable you". I've gone ahead and asked ChatGPT, the famous alternative intelligence tool, to write me a portion of this sermon on the specialness of humanity.[9] Here's what AI created:

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[7] A reference to the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes 1:9, New Revised Standard Version.
[8] "The Turing Test", by Graham Oppy & David Dowe, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
[9] "Humanity's Sacred Tapestry", *ChatGPT*.

In the grand symphony of existence, each one of us is a unique note, an irreplaceable melody that contributes to the divine composition of life. Today, let us reflect on the profound specialness and irreplaceability of humanity. We are not mere spectators in the unfolding drama of the cosmos; rather, we are active participants, each endowed with a singular set of gifts and perspectives. Just as no two snowflakes are identical, no two human beings are the same. Our individuality is not a flaw but a testament to the infinite creativity of the universe.

Consider the intricacies of your own life–the experiences that have shaped you, the trials that have forged your resilience, and the joys that have kindled the light within. In this intricate dance of being, you are not a mere bystander; you are a cosmic masterpiece, a manifestation of the sacred energy that courses through the universe. The tapestry of humanity is woven with threads of love, compassion, and creativity. Each one of us holds a brush to paint the canvas of our shared existence, leaving behind strokes that ripple through time. Your presence in this cosmic masterpiece is irreplaceable, for no one else can contribute the brushstrokes of your unique essence.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This affirmation is *not* a passive nod to diversity; it is a celebration of the sacred tapestry we collectively create. Embrace the truth that you are indispensable to the symphony of life, a vital note in the cosmic melody. In recognizing the specialness... of humanity, let us approach each day with gratitude for the gift of existence and a deep sense of responsibility to honor the beauty within ourselves and others.

The universe is made more magnificent by your presence. Cherish the melody that only you can play. Blessed be.

May it be so. Amen.