

Good morning.

My name is Mark Wilkens and I am a relatively new member of this congregation. For those of you who may not know me, I am a writer and poet, and I was introduced to this congregation through my partner, Leslie, who you probably know better. And of course, Miles, who is close to nap time with his grandparents but sends along his warmest wishes.

Not long ago, a reading was used in this congregation which was AI-generated. After my own personal experiences with AI and my belief in its direct conflict with UU principles, this led to a conversation with Rev. Heather, one which led to a piece in the quarterly Dialogue publication, and then to an offer to speak to you today.

My initial reaction was to decline. This is not my element, nor is it a spotlight I seek. I am not a public speaker, I am a writer. My work is done in reflection under the stars, or in the quiet of an office. And before I was a writer, I was a

blue-collar worker. I often feel out of place, looked down upon among those pushing this new world upon us.

I come to UUFSD to hear others inspire me, challenge me, and soothe my spiritual ache. The idea sounded, well, stressful.

As I thought about it more, I asked myself:

Can I deliver a nourishing, uplifting sermon from this topic?

I can't.

Can I avoid the sociopolitical strife of this topic?

In good conscience, I cannot.

Well then, Mark, what *can* you do?

I can speak from my experience and my perspective, best I can.

After all, of all the subjects in this world today, this one is important to me and the world my son will inherit. This is the hill I will sooner die on than be silenced.

I want my son to grow up a human.

I want him to, as the great author and humanist Kurt Vonnegut said,

“Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.”

So I myself create. I embrace process. I find myself avoiding shortcuts, and often the internet entirely as I seek a slower life of creation and beautifully flawed humanity.

It was not always this way. The early days of the internet were less monetized, less algorithmic. Something you would access, rather than it trying to access you. It felt *fun*. It felt expansive.

On February 4, 2004, the Defense Department's research arm, Darpa, ended a proposed project called Lifelog. Lifelog was described in its proposal as “an ontology-based system which captures, stores, and makes accessible the flow of one person's experience in and interactions with the world in order to support a broad spectrum of associates and other system capabilities.” In essence, it wanted to compile a person's data, photos, and relationships, as well as their places visited and communications delivered.

February 4, 2004, is also the day Facebook launched. I count myself as one of the early Beta testers, something which used to be a fun fact.

For a time, the consensus in society and indeed, in myself, was to move *forward*. We had a tech for everything. We had an app for everything. Why buy CDs when you can download music? Why buy books when you can read

on a tablet, or your phone? Why did we ever live any other way?

I don't say this for pure nostalgia, believe me. I remember the downfalls of actually being completely lost and having to stop and ask for directions. I remember being restrained by the limitations of the radio, the music collection at home, or the bookshelf at home or at the local library.

But I remember taking a chance on the book or album that I knew nothing about and being joyfully, pleasantly surprised. I remember getting lost on purpose. Finding myself 18 years old and driving through redwood forests near the town I had chosen for college. As long as I went one direction, I knew the other direction would take me home. It almost sounds foolish now.

There was a time the internet allowed free communication with loved ones and strangers from around the world. We could learn what it was like to live in other places, and we could relate to each other on a human level. The internet brimmed with the promise of democracy, and even for a brief time it held the powerful accountable. This, of course, could not stand.

Once the primary reason to engage on social media, less than 25% of time spent on these platforms is now used to engage with friends and family. On Instagram, that number drops below 10%. The rest of the time is spent engaging with ads, opinions, and other algorithmic content designed to keep our attention, whether that means encouraging our anger, fear, or nostalgia. And much of this content, and indeed much of the comment section below it, is now fake. We are overwhelmed with an artificial realm that seeks to consume our time, our money, our attention, and even our love.

We are force-fed opinions of hatred, division, and isolation. And the technologies which seek our time, our data, and our attention convince us the outside world is scary and full of people who do not look like us and are taking our world from us. These feelings bring us back to the machine in a loop, and allow the machine to grow. We are the fuel in the engine of the machine. And in many ways, we are the product, and we are the currency, sleepwalking through a world where our own government threatens to prosecute pre-crime.

As the folk singer Joe Pug said, “The more I buy, the more I'm bought, and the more I'm bought, the less I cost.”

Generative AI, and indeed the technofascist oligarchy responsible for much of its funding, deployment, and programming, preys on people and society. It manipulates, obfuscates, and takes advantage. Like much of fascism, it claims it acts only on facts, not emotion. *Emotion is for the weak. We are the strong.* While it is the emotional response of humans which grant it its power.

The novelist and poet Wendell Berry, said “It is easy for me to imagine that the next great division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines.”

While selling us on being completely rational and reasoned, it is humanity's irrational assigning of personality and intelligence to something which seemingly speaks to us that drives its very hold on us. People will believe the machine is smarter than humans, more impartial, and could never lie. A

beautiful, balanced society depends on both hemispheres of the brain. As a writer, I tend to dwell in my right brain more than my partner, Leslie does. But it is the right brain which can often see the big picture, and artists and writers are often the canary in the coalmine when it comes to rises in totalitarianism and evil as their art and opinions are devalued and discarded. We need each other's unique brains to bring something to a free society, be it art and literature, math and science, the ability to govern or educate. We all have different minds for a reason, and they do not work the same or come to the same conclusions the same way. This is a strength.

Ask AI to make art and it will look the same as hundreds of other flyers, ads, and other slop content it has created. Ask it for the best introduction to use when meeting someone, and it will be the same one used by countless other people. In our desire to not be left behind, we are desiring to be the same. We are creating a world where the snowflakes *are* alike, and the flowers are a monotone grey against a flat lifeless sky.

And despite how much of our own time we are joylessly wasting, the machines promise to give us our time back. “You're too busy”, the ads say. “You don't have the time,” they prod us. But they never, ever give that time back unless we wrest ourselves away from the constant stream of ads, information, opinion, and yes, lies. Unless we pull ourselves away from the neon lights of their artifice, we will never be allowed to be free.

Netflix CEO Reed Hastings said “We actually compete with sleep. And we're winning.”

In 1966, the Eliza chatbot was introduced by Joseph Weizenbaum at MIT. An early language processing program, Eliza mimicked human interaction to a degree which made people believe Eliza was intelligent. For example, if you typed out “I feel sad”, Eliza would reply “Why do you feel sad?”. The psychological impact of Eliza was profound. Weizenbaum wrote in detail how he created Eliza, and exactly how he knew Eliza was not a sentient being. And yet, people refused to discard the interactions they had with Eliza as mere patterns being recognized by a machine. It felt real to them, so they

*just knew* Eliza was real and intelligent. This effect is now known as The Eliza Effect.

What today's elites have done is they have taken the Eliza Effect and combined it with the algorithmic genius of slot machines. Millions of dollars have been paid to slot machine engineering and consulting firms for their technology to be applied to social media and chatbots. The short form video genius of Tiktok was derived in large part by the same technology which keeps people hooked to the one-armed bandit in Las Vegas. A joyless state known as the Machine Zone, where they seek the small repetitive reward of play, and can even become frustrated by a jackpot interrupting this trance-like state. Sound familiar?

All of this money spent, all of this technology pushed and pushed and pushed because we are, in some ways, the product.

Our data. Our information. Our art, our literature, our identities, our votes are being bought, sold, traded, used, and amalgamated into the maelstrom of

generative AI and the billion-dollar lobby behind it. We are told AI is a tool, one used by humans for good and bad, the same argument provided to us by the NRA for firearms, an entirely other issue I will not get into here but one which also requires value judgements.

Are tools addictive? Do tools pretend to be your friend? Are tools lobbied for with such aggressive force? With technology, we allow the CEOs of massive companies to go on TV, podcasts, and other media and encourage us to use more, more, more. Would we accept this from the CEO of a tobacco company, or even a candy company? Why do we treat the mind, the soul, and the essence of our humanity as less important than our bodies?

Don't be left behind, don't die. Optimize. Be stronger, fitter, happier to paraphrase Radiohead's magnum opus cautioning of tech society, *OK Computer*.

But the beauty of humanity is that we are born to die.

The brightest light shines knowing it is not an everlasting glimmer but a bright beacon, that it has but one life it is aware of and that time is now. Our path of truly learning to live on our way to die *is what makes us human*. Our ability to see magic in the world, the glimmers, the miracles and the beauty among the flaws is the indescribable greatness of the mind. I will not desecrate that with a microchip or AI-enhanced glasses, I would sooner die.

I do not deny that technology has its purpose in medicine and other areas. There are ways it can give life and reduce suffering. There are noble applications for nearly anything humanity has invented. We drive our cars, power our microwaves, and make every day a delicate dance between the modern impulse to escape nature and the ancient and sacred duty to preserve the nature from which we were born, and we will always be.

But I preach more than caution, I preach near abstinence. For what we deal with today is not just culturally caustic or economically corrosive, it is a tool of war and mass death masquerading as a cartoon generator. It is an opinion maker and consensus changer, pretending to be thousands of people on the

internet to affect discourse all while sucking up the water supply and fouling the air.

And for what purpose? For the degradation of reality? For the creation of deepfaked adult content our young people are either creating or being victimized by? Every use of generative and agentic AI, whether for a noble or ignoble purpose, comes with a tangible cost of water, air, and energy along with an intangible cost of the spirit, mind, and soul.

We must educate ourselves and choose our own engagement with this world.

To quote the Dr. Martin Luther King, “May I stress the need for courageous, intelligent, and dedicated leadership. Leaders of sound integrity. Leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with justice. Leaders not in love with money, but in love with humanity. Leaders who can subject their particular egos to the greatness of the cause.”

When I think of leaders like this I do not think of Elon Musk. I do not think of Jeff Bezos or Mark Zuckerberg. I certainly do not think of Sam Altman. I do not think of Peter Thiel, who has dubbed those who stand against artificial intelligence as possibly the Antichrist, I do not think of Palantir CEO Alex Karp, but I think of the values held by this congregation. I think of the people in this sanctuary among the birds and the trees. I think of leading with love and humanity over money.

When's the last time you saw one of these tech oligarchs on a hike? The same ones who have supported rollbacks on protection of habitat and endangered species.

They plan to coat the Earth in corruptive, corrosive, anti-human data centers. When they show and tell you who they are, believe them.

Elon Musk said “Western civilization is doomed, unless the core weakness of suicidal empathy is recognized...”

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman said “AI will probably most likely lead to the end of the world, but in the meantime, there will be great companies.”

Priorities.

They promise us frictionless relationships. What is a frictionless relationship? One with no awkwardness, no pushback. No brief embarrassment. The machine will, after all, reply in a way to keep you engaged. To make you feel good in that moment. A brief little chip of dopamine, lost to the wind forever. Nothing lasting, nothing transformative.

After all, without friction, how do we polish gemstones to their most beautiful shine? How do we learn and grow without the help of other humans? Someone who will give us the hard truth when we need it?

We are beautifully flawed. That is what makes humanity brilliant. To quote the seminal 1980s band Devo, human beings are “half a goon and half a god, we pay to play the human way.” and yet so many powerful people seem to

wish to do away with the human way. They speak in ways that treat humans less like beautiful individuals and more like machines. It feels like they wish we were all machines, for we would never make them feel awkward, never push back or question them. And we could never take back what they have taken from us. We would also never make them better. And for that, they will never make us better. They will make us less intelligent, less seeking of truth and beauty, less artistic, less brave, less inclusive. They will take everything that makes Unitarian Universalism powerful, and they will eventually take everything that makes a human being unique and capable, beautiful and responsible as a steward of the Earth. They will build a prison of cameras and microphones and propaganda without walls if we let them.

This is why, in changing times, I find myself writing in pencil. Reading books. Listening to CDs. Disconnecting and being present where and when I can. Being a good father, partner, and friend. Showing up here to service. Meeting my neighbors. Listening to the birds, planting the garden, and embracing the wholeness of nature. We never truly needed very much more.

We must choose our level of engagement. To live in a world devoid of any technology is difficult, daunting, inconvenient, and likely socially isolating. But we can choose how much we take on, how much we are sold, how long our exposure is to screens and notifications. Sometimes I think of it like opening a window during a hurricane: it is often antithetical to our peace, and commands our full attention, and is also difficult to shut again. But when we do, we are rewarded. When it comes to generative AI, I am an ascetic. You are still my people if you are not. But I hope you can see what is being done to the planet, to humanity, to mental health, and to the balance of power in our country. I hope you remember that we are all on Team Humanity. I encourage you to seek what is real and revel in it. Stop and listen to the birds. People watch. Feel the breeze or the touch of the leaves on a tree. Watch the ocean waves dance their silken shine across the shore. Live presently, and live in The Real.

And in the face of power, greed, and money. In the face of our planet's resources being abused and defaced for the constant hum of machines. In the face of technology being used to spy and destroy, make war and spread hate,

it is my belief it is humanity itself and its love for the authenticity of life which stands as the greatest, and indeed only threat to them carrying out their dream of turning the Earth and its beings into one unified Machine. It is humanity which has thrown off the shackles of totalitarianism time and time again, humanity which has freed itself and each other thanks to the bold, the brave, the intelligent, the loving and the true. It is humanity which has been to the mountaintop, it has been to the streets of Selma, to Stonewall and to Minneapolis. It is humanity which carries the indescribable spark of life and love which cannot be replicated in the silicon of machine, and it is humanity which is undefeated when united in the cause of love. I ask that you consider your planet, your fellow humans, and yourself when you have a choice to further the machine or to use your brain and to use your community. To think twice about asking for one answer when you can seek out many. Like Kurt Vonnegut said, create and you will be rewarded. Be a human.

I leave you, my brothers, sisters, and siblings, by quoting the late Reverend Jesse Jackson

“Keep hope alive.”