Creating the Future We Want

By
Todd F. Eklof
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Among my many interests, I am a futurist and have been preaching positively and hopefully about the future for more than twenty years. My first sermon on the subject was *A Letter to the Far Future*, given in 2004, expressing my hope that the beings we will evolve into will be better than us while, at the same time, having retained the best of us. It seemed then as if I was writing to a species thousands of years away. Today, I see them arriving much sooner, probably within my own lifetime. I think there's a good chance many of us alive now will have an opportunity to transition into the very beings I was writing to only two decades ago —as science-fictiony as that sounds.

That's how fast things are changing, at a speed our linear way of perceiving the world almost always underestimates. This was largely the point of Ray Kurzweil's bestselling book, *The Singularity is Near*, published in 2005, a year after my letter to the far future. In it, he introduces his mathematical law of accelerating returns, showing how technology, unlike biology, evolves exponentially, not linearly. For example, if you place a single grain of rice on one square of a chess board, then continue to double the amount on each of the remaining 63 squares, you end up with 9.2 quintillion grains of rice, more than a thousand times what we harvest on Earth each year. That's the power of exponentials; 2 to the 64th power. Likewise, if you take 64 steps, you might make it from here to your car in the parking lot, but if you double your distance with each step, you could walk around the circumference of our planet 351 billion times.

This means things are going to change fast during the next few months and years when it comes to technology, at a pace we can't keep up with. It's going to feel frightening, sometimes for good reason. Change often requires adjustment time and steep learning curves, which, because of our biological and neurological limitations, we won't always get.

Without going deeply into it, these days the human brain is widely considered to be a prediction machine. As neuroscientist Andy Clark explains, "Contrary to the standard belief that our senses are a kind of passive window onto the world, what is emerging is a picture of an ever-active brain that is always striving to predict what the world might currently have to offer."[1] In short, we're not taking in the world, we're creating and recreating it out of our expectations. This is why, as I discussed in a recent sermon, we don't like surprises. We like to imagine, rather, that we know what's coming because of our marvelously predictive brains. But, as Clark goes on to say, "Nothing we do or experience—if the theory is on track —is untouched by our own expectations … Instead, all human experience is part phantom —the product of deep-set predictions."[2] Not only does this mean our predictions are sometimes wrong, it means what we perceive can be misaligned with reality.

And in an age of exponential change, our predictive brains are going to often fail us (because things will change faster than we can predict). They are failing us now, which is why there is so much fear about Artificial Intelligence that's advancing so fast even its builders are holding back the release of some of its latest models. It's advancing so quickly that we're all having trouble predicting what's going to happen next, which is why we're worried about its impacts on the workforce, geopolitics, national security, and the very survival of our species. We don't know what's going to happen, and not knowing the future frightens us, which is why our predictive brains are on overdrive concocting some of the worse-case scenarios—including human extinction.

Just last month Bernie Sanders introduced the Ban Artificial Superintelligence Act. If passed, which is highly unlikely, it would prohibit the development of superintelligence, seek international commitments from other countries to do the same, pause further advances in AI development until federal regulations are established, and shut down corporations that violate the law. Sanders has separately called for a twenty-year prison sentence for anyone attempting to develop superintelligence.

Let me pause for a point of clarification. The "very stable genius" occupying the White House recently ordered that the government now refer to artificial intelligence as superintelligence. It may surprise your predictive brains, but President Trump doesn't know what he's talking about. In the field, there are three levels of machine intelligence: Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is what we have now, is an aggregate of human knowledge that we can access for information, to work, or to create at tremendous speeds. "The average AI supercomputer is already 120 million times faster than the processing rate of the human brain."[3] Faster, but not necessarily a lot smarter than us, and it is sometimes referred to as "narrow AI."

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) refers to systems that can understand, learn, and apply knowledge across any intellectual task as well or better than humans. General Intelligence doesn't exist yet but, according to the law of accelerating returns and industry leaders, it will arrive as early as next year and no later than the end of this decade.

Then there's Artificial Superintelligence (ASI), made popular by philosopher Nick Bostrom in his 2014 book by the same title. It refers to machine intelligence that outperforms humans in speed, memory, and general reasoning, is smarter than any human expert in every field, and may even become conscious. Nobody can adequately predict when it will arrive, but it seems inevitable that it will.

Enough said about that. This isn't meant to be another sermon about technology. Despite the title, it's not even about the future. It's about us and it's about now. Yet, AI, AGI, and ASI have become the central source of our collective anxieties in this moment of exponential change. which is important to grasp. We have to acknowledge it so we can more objectively consider if the reality our predictive brains expect is fact or phantom. For there are other sources of anxiety that ought to be just as concerning, if not more, that our linear brains can see happening in real time, that aren't getting the attention they need; global warming being the most urgent, along with the rise of authoritarianism around the world, including here in the U.S.; and the toll all the war and violence of the 21st century is taking on human life. I'm concerned the future-oriented fears generated by our predictive brains are distracting us from these real and very serious challenges happening right now.

After attending Singularity University in 2018 and realizing just how fast things were about to begin changing, I realized my skills are best suited to help people learn to live and thrive in an age of exponential change. This is why I so often speak about how our brains work, about their tendencies toward fear, repetition, and prediction; along with their dislike of change and uncertainty. For if we better understand *how* we think, we might learn to recognize the faults and fallacies that are leading us astray.

Habitual beliefs and behaviors, for example, greatly facilitate our drive to predict the future. Simply repeating what we've done in the past, after all, takes much of the guess work out of our predictions. Thinking and doing as usual will generally have the usual results. Sadly, we're used to living with global warming and its disastrous impacts on the environment. We're used to authoritarians ruling the world. We're used to all of its war and violence and hostility. It may be miserable, but we can adequately predict what the world will be like tomorrow. And for many, that's good enough. But we currently have no idea what AI is going to lead to, so our fear of change is prompting us to predict that it will have terrible consequences.

Maybe it will. Like most tools, I expect it will, just as I expect it will yield great benefits. But my point now is that living in a state of fear about what might happen while remaining far too complacent about serious problems that are happening and already resulting in misery and death for many, one of which really is a potential extinction event, is not helping humanity to thrive. We're living in a state of fear and, I believe, fantasy, because our preoccupation with figuring out the future is causing us to forget about the present.

Our fear of the future is most fundamentally a fear of uncertainty and change; it is the fear of not being able to continue on as we have been so that life remains familiar and predictable. This is why Trump is undermining environmental regulations and policies and attempting to burn more coal and use more oil, and what his supporters mean by "make

America great again." It's why so many are addicted to tobacco, drugs, and alcohol. It's also why, on both the Right and the Left, so many are now obsessing about AI, because our fearful and predictive brains are always directed toward the future, even if it's just toward what's around the next corner or bend in the road.

The problem with such thinking, in addition to ignoring the present, is, as Reid Hoffman and Greg Beato so memorably remind us in their book *Superagency*, "You'll never get the future you want simply by prohibiting the future you don't want."[4] Fear of the future makes us want to prevent our frightening predictions about if from coming true, which is not a constructive way of shaping what we and the world will become.

This is so, not only of the far future or exponential advances in technology. It's about our individual futures, too. How many of us stay stuck in the same routines, relationships, moods, and mindsets even though we know they aren't good for us? They may not be good, but they are reliable, that's why. And, again, being able to reliably predict what comes next is not only how our brains work, but how we fashion our realities. "Perception itself, far from being a simple window onto the world," Clark says, "is permeated from the get-go by our own predictions and expectations."[5] Our realities are always, at least partially, hallucinations.

Yet humanity, as stuck as it remains in many of its ancient ways and mindsets, has also long attempted to pierce the veil of our illusions and delusions; to discover the true nature of reality and more than our small worldviews. This is why we have developed philosophy, logic, and science, and why our ancestors dared to venture so far from what is familiar that we now live everywhere on the planet—in the hottest and most barren deserts, in the frozen tundras of the Arctic and Antarctic, on mountains so high they leave us oxygen deprived, in jungles and savannahs where we still face powerful predators and deadly snakes. We've even descended beneath the breathless and overbearing weight of oceans and blasted into the dead zones of outer space and are eyeing moonbases, trips to mars, and living in floating space cities. So, we can rise above, literally and figuratively, the limitations of our endogenous ways of thinking and being. We can transcend the fear of what comes next because of this competing human tendency to venture into the unknown.

But we don't have to climb Mt. Everest or go to Mars to satisfy this need, nor to overcome our innate fear of change and the unknown. We can simply make small to large changes in our own lives by letting go of the beliefs and habits we know are holding us back. From exploring new perspectives and beliefs, to moving on from bad relationships, to shifting jobs or careers, and so forth. The secret to moving on isn't ridding ourselves of the fear. We can't do that because it's largely how we're wired. But it is fostering that other drive, the drive of life itself, to transcend our limitations by venturing into new and unknown places

and states of being. When we do this, our predominant emotions aren't fear and hostility toward the future and change, but hope and enthusiasm for the future and the transformation it might bring. The uncertainty remains the same in both cases. It is the emotional attitude that makes the difference.

This state of adventure, excitement, and enthusiasm, unlike the fearful predictive approach, doesn't try to avoid the future but to help shape it. It doesn't ask what kind of future we are afraid of while working to prevent it from happening, as Trump's insistence that climate change is a hoax, and Bernie Sanders' effort to preempt the advent of superintelligence illustrate. It is forward thinking and asks what kind of future do we want to create for ourselves? What steps must we take now to make it happen so that our predictive brains can expect the best?

So how do we go about creating the future we want? Firstly, whether for us as individuals or for the whole of humanity, it requires a mindset based on hope. But remember, hope is not wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is baseless. Hope is rooted in the knowledge that certain actions we take can lead to the outcomes we want. There must be genuine reasons to hope we can make a difference and create the future we want.

Such hope, then, leads to an optimistic heart that allows us to go about our lives with enthusiasm and happiness no matter how overwhelming the problems before us. Although, optimism is likely to transform those problems into challenges, possibilities, and exciting adventures to embark upon. Optimism, from the Greek word meaning "best," is the belief that good will ultimately prevail in the world.

And it is only through this optimism for the future that our rational hope brings us that we are motivated to take the actions necessary to create the future we want. Fear and pessimism screams stop, stay, don't go there. But hope and optimism say yes, let's move forward. Let's grow, change, make the world better and become our best in the process. It gives us a sense of agency—the belief in ourselves and that we can make a meaningful difference; that we can change our lives and change the world.

And this belief in ourselves is what then gives us the courage, despite the fear and uncertainty, to move forward and to actively participate in what the future will become, rather than remaining its passive victims. It is courage that changes problems into possibilities, obstacles into opportunities, and uncertainty into adventures. It is courage that propels us to take the next leap forward even when almost everyone else and every other instinct tells us to give into the fear and remain tethered to the past and its endless cycle of repetition.

Finally, taking that leap requires that we be thoughtful. Thoughtful is a great word because it means being both intelligent and kind. We are thoughtful when we don't bound blindly forward, but with a well-considered, realistic plan for success in creating the future we want. And we are thoughtful when we work to ensure our choices and actions don't overlook or undermine the welfare of others. We move forward, but with these overarching concerns always before us.

In their book, *Genesis*, Eric Schmidt, Craig Mundie, and Henry Kissinger write, "What some see as an anchor to steady ourselves in the storm, others see as a leash holding us back. What some praise as necessary steps toward a pinnacle of human potential, others see as a headlong rush into an abyss."[6] Neither perspective is entirely right or wrong. There are genuine reasons to fear both the present and the future. But the fear, despite how it feels, is not enough to keep us safe. We must overcome it in order to create the future we need and want. Again, as they say in *Genesis*, "The fearful will slow their own development and sabotage that of others. The overconfident will disguise their powers and, in secret, speed up their work."[7]

Whichever of these mindsets most dominate us, the future is not something that merely happens to any of us; it is something we participate in creating through the choices we make or don't make today. And if we approach it with hope, optimism, agency, courage, and thoughtfulness, we may discover that the future we fear is not nearly as predictable as the future we have the capacity to create.

[1] Clark, Andy, *The Experience Machine: How Our Minds Predict and Shape Reality*, Pantheon Books, Kindle Edition, 2023

[2] Ibid.

[3]Henry A. Kissinger, Craig Mundie, and Eric Schmidt, *Genesis: Artificial Intelligence, Hope, and the Human Spirit,* Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Kindle Edition, 2024.

[4] Beato, Greg; Hoffman, Ried, *Superagency: What Can Possibly Go Right with Our AI Future*, Authors Equity, New York, NY, 2025, p. xiii

[5] Clark, ibid.

[6] Kissinger, Henry A.; Schmidt, Eric; Mundie, Craig. Genesis: Artificial Intelligence, Hope, and the Human Spirit (p. 216). Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition.

[7] Ibid.