

The New Luxury Is Thinking for Yourself

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Picture a woman being evicted in San Francisco. Not in court. Not yet. First, in a text box.

Her story arrives unevenly: the rent increase, the mold, the coughing child, the notice taped to the door, the missed shift, the late fee that turned into a spiral. She types the way people do when they are afraid of being misunderstood, with too many details and an apology folded into every sentence. She cannot afford a lawyer. She can barely afford the minutes it takes to explain herself.

On the other side of the screen, a system receives her life and begins to reorganize it.

Fear becomes categories: unlawful detainer, habitability issue, potential retaliation. The system drafts a response, suggests next steps, and recommends a tone that will be legible to institutions accustomed to calm rather than urgency.

It produces something that resembles power, and in a narrow sense, it is.

Yet something subtler is exchanged in the process. The system does not simply help her speak. It teaches her, quietly and efficiently, which forms of speech will be recognized and which will dissolve into noise.

Her story is shaped until it fits. Her urgency is translated into a grammar the system accepts. She becomes legible. And once legibility is mediated through a machine, it becomes difficult not to begin editing oneself before speaking at all.

This is the dimension of artificial intelligence that resists easy measurement. We often discuss these systems as economic instruments that disrupt labor markets, accelerate productivity, and reorder industries. Those questions matter. They attract capital and structure policy debates. But they do not fully capture what is at stake.

What unsettles me is not whether machines will come to think like us, but whether the conditions that allow humans to think slowly, reflectively, and inwardly will remain available to everyone.

I help build these tools. I have worked on AI systems for legal aid, designed to assist people navigating institutions whose complexity functions as a form of quiet violence: systems that exhaust through delay, opacity, and the steady demand to prove oneself again and again. I believe deeply in that work.

At the same time, I cannot claim innocence from the transformations it participates in. I can feel the shift in myself: the gentle pressure toward speed, the relief of delegation, the slow erosion of patience. Assistance begins to substitute for endurance. Convenience begins to masquerade as care.

The moment this became clear to me arrived not in a meeting, but on a bench in Alamo Square. Tourists framed the Painted Ladies in photographs. A delivery driver toggled between three apps, his attention divided into profitable increments. A café worker scrolled without aim, not searching for information so much as briefly suspending the demand to be a person.

I was reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel in which time folds, where memory and present coexist, and where meaning emerges only through sustained attention.

The contrast was arresting. It was the same park at the same hour, and yet we had radically different relationships to the interior life. That was not because one of us was more thoughtful than the others. Some of us had the quiet and the slack in our day that inwardness requires, and others did not.

That asymmetry is not new. But technology now threatens to formalize it.

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A 2025 study found that when dangerous instructions are rewritten as poetry, relying on ambiguity rather than direct command, many leading AI systems fail to recognize them as harmful. Safeguards collapse, and meaning slips through.

This is usually treated as a technical loophole. I think it points to something more fundamental.

Machines process explicit instruction well. They struggle where meaning depends on implication, context, and emotional inheritance, on what the reader brings rather than what the sentence provides.

Ocean Vuong writes, "The most beautiful part of your body is wherever your mother's shadow falls."

The line cannot function on its own. It requires the reader's memory, grief, intimacy, and loss. Meaning does not arrive fully formed; it completes itself only when someone is willing to stay with it.

Machines can generate sentences that resemble beauty. They cannot inhabit the attention that allows beauty to take hold.

Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch both argued that attention is not merely cognitive but ethical, that how we attend shapes what we are capable of seeing, valuing, and loving. If the capacity to dwell, to remain, and to resist speed is allowed to atrophy under the pressure of efficiency, the failure will not be technical. It will be ethical.

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A pattern emerges when we look closely at how these systems enter everyday life.

For some, AI functions as leverage. Those with time, stability, and room to question use it as an extension of thought. They test outputs, probe assumptions, and treat the system as provisional rather than authoritative.

For others, AI arrives as replacement. In lives structured by precarity, the promise of speed is not an indulgence but a necessity. Reflection becomes costly, and attention feels unaffordable.

The distinction is not intelligence. It is oxygen.

Some lives contain the mental and temporal space that inwardness requires. Others are organized around urgency, where every pause carries risk. It is hard to reflect while being chased by consequences.

In such environments, technologies that offer relief also shape cognition. They narrow choice and simplify narrative. They teach users, gently, how to be understood by systems that do not have time to listen. Over time, people do not merely comply. They internalize the grammar.

What disappears is slack, the unproductive margin where thought lingers and questions form without immediate purpose. That margin is where attention becomes moral.

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This is not unprecedented. Administrative systems have long reshaped inner life. When automated welfare systems misfired, as Australia's Robodebt scheme did, the harm extended beyond finances. People learned to narrate themselves in ways that would not trigger scrutiny. They learned which emotions were safe to express and which details invited delay or denial. The lesson was not only how to survive the system, but how to think within it.

AI threatens to universalize this dynamic, not through coercion but through helpfulness, through tools that streamline experience by compressing it. What begins as assistance gradually becomes instruction.

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I do not pretend to resolve this tension.

When I build AI systems for legal aid, I believe they offer real support. And yet I also see how easily technology becomes a substitute for conditions we refuse to provide: time, care, institutional patience, and human presence.

The contradiction does not disappear, and it should not. Every system we build raises the same question: does this expand a person's capacity to think, or does it train them to require less thinking of themselves? The discomfort of that question is not a flaw. It is a warning.

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What concerns me, finally, is not that machines will think for us. It is that thinking itself may become optional, and then rare.

Some people will grow up with the security to wrestle with ideas, to dwell in uncertainty, and to let meaning arrive slowly. Others will be educated into fluency with summaries, substitutions, and defaults, tools that move them past thought rather than through it.

Not through force. Through convenience.

We will call this efficiency, or access, or progress. But if sustained attention requires time, silence, and safety, then inner life will no longer belong to everyone. It will belong to those who can afford the conditions that make it possible.

And the rest will not lose thought dramatically. They will simply find that it is no longer asked of them.