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Luther College’s Director of Admissions asked me yesterday, “When parents and students ask me, ‘How will Luther prepare me for AI in the workplace,’ what do you, as a faculty member, think I should tell them? What would *you* tell them?” Here’s my answer:

Education is about building a self with something constructive to say and the capacity for positive, curiosity-driven action in the living world right now. Of course, being human means accepting change: this world is and has always been too big, beautiful, and varied a place ever to be a *certain* place. Therefore, to live a full life in it, you need a sense of who you *are* and *might become* that goes beyond what you can *do*, *make*, or *earn*, and definitely beyond what social trends tell you you are worth. Sure, you’ll get field-specific training here (in addition to whatever you’ll always need to learn on any job itself), but a liberal-arts education isn’t *primarily* meant to “teach you how to use AI” or any other business-tech tool. If it’s focused on that, its ambitions are insufficient and its promise is false, because no college curriculum can guarantee a clear outcome against such a moving target. My job as a professor of reading and writing is to help you become a human being AI can’t replace, whatever that will look like in 5, 10, or 15 years, and to walk with you as that process unfolds. I can’t see, now, where you might end up. But I can help you build a habit of chasing excellence, unpredictably and widely: geeking out, reading, writing, and thinking with the voice and the energy and skill that will always be unique to you, owning your own power to define who you are and who you’ll become and how you’ll grow throughout your life. You’ll build curiosity and an appetite for difficulty, reading challenging texts and revising your writing and thinking around corners, just as humans have done for thousands of years. But, alas, this is actually *harder* than plugging you into a module labeled “AI Skills” (or any “skills”) and promising results. Because, just like life, real education asks *you* to join in and commit yourself in ways that involve discomfort, joy, vulnerability, and change. Every day, you have to show up, without always knowing for what, and ask yourself and your teacher and your fellow students for *more* – even as AI is changing everything around us every day and no one knows what jobs will even exist in a year.

Why do we want to hear otherwise? Because, especially with a lot of tuition money and real-life uncertainty at stake, we want to hear of “value” in the familiar language of capitalism – spend money and get guaranteed, easy results. Put in X\$ and get XX\$ back. Attract customers. Be “efficient.” Engage in a pre-determined set of activities and receive a purchased output at the end, like the certificate you get from clicking through those information-security training videos you have to watch at work. Capitalism isn’t always wrong. Yet it can’t describe everything. How much is your child’s life “worth?” Why are you proud to have done something difficult even when it cost discomfort or pain – writing your own novel instead of ChatGPTing it? Let’s talk reality: at its AI-assisted worst, capitalism reduces living beings to dollar signs, in defiance of their inherent dignity and worth. It gives you the illusion of control over the basic, uncontrollable realities of life: limitation, mortality, time. And it reduces the thing we say we value – freedom – by reducing one person’s opportunity in order to increase (by algorithmic concentration) another’s wealth. At every level, it substitutes a stolen simulacrum of life for life itself.

This makes AI the natural enemy of education as I believe in it. I further believe that AI and the wealth it steals and concentrates are now the greatest threat to human and nonhuman life on earth. Resisting it starts with naming its ironies. AI’s now deemed to possess agency, the ability to make choices and create results (Anthropic’s tool Claude is called “agentic.”) Yet AI actually reduces human agency by foreclosing, in advance, meaningful jobs in every single field, even for students who’ve done everything right. Therefore, latching onto AI “skills” as a guarantee of a college education’s value denies the reality that AI itself (and the billionaire-industrial complex behind it) have *removed* economic guarantees from the lives of college

graduates and other humans all over the world. Busily feeding your words into ChatGPT to “help you write efficiently” builds up its pattern-recognition capabilities at the expense of your own ability to generate and express your own thoughts. And it makes you complicit in theft. Indeed, much of AI is built on theft. Novelists, musicians, and painters find their creations stolen. Videos are deepfaked. Data centers suck up water and energy. For short-term consumer pleasure and convenience, humans sacrifice our lives.

Why? Because a) the system seems too big to fight (although I’m not sure it is), and b) at the level of everyday life and choice, it’s easier. Which leads back to c) What’s education really for?

Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (400-ish BC) answers this question with a story. Imagine prisoners have been chained in a cave their whole lives, watching shadows on the wall in front of them, manipulated by someone else (Plato’s never quite clear who). They’d probably find ways to get comfortable there, even achieve status, offering prizes for who could name the shadows or predict their patterns best. If one prisoner were to escape into the world above, he’d be blinded at first by the sun, but then realize he was living a life based on real things rather than shadows, despite his sore eyes and stiff limbs. Eager to help his fellow prisoners, he’d scramble back down into the cave and tell them all about it. But the prisoners would not welcome him as a savior. They’d kill him. He’s disturbed their comfort. He’s shattered their image of who they thought they were in the safety of their cave, for good.

Plato intends this to symbolize the effect of education on our minds, specifically on what happens when we accept or refuse the difficulty of turning our eyes up to the light. When I read this text with first-year students, they say it asks them: who *do* you think you are, and why. Consumer. Athlete. “Busy” kid (offered “busy-ness as a way of doing school *without* intellectual deep work.) Child of your parents. Child in relation to your family. Social media and X followers. But what if you are more than what any of these pre-made labels offer you? How can you know? How will you tell? How can you ask – really ask – “I am being offered this label, this purchased product, this easy explanation for who I am. How do I know it’s true? What *do* I want from the one life on earth I’ll ever have? Joy is possible – where?”

If you ask this, and keep asking it, and turn back to texts and books and meaningful conversations with all the other humans, past and present, who have asked this – congratulations. You’re a human. You’re doing the things only humans can do. You have avoided the big, dangerous illusion that “college” is only about purchasing a quick fix, a plug-and-play skillset, a one-and-done credential. College is about joining into the long conversations of the past to do the hardest and most meaningful work humans do in the present, with one another, which builds up our muscles for any difficulty of life: asking who we are and what we will do before we die. The human with the appetite for big questions, thirsty for meaning and its wellspring sources throughout time, who can follow that impulse through changes no one can predict: that’s the curious, big-hearted soul AI can’t replace.

Frankenstein; or; The Modern Prometheus (1818), a world-changing novel of technology and humanity, was written by a nineteen-year-old girl. Many nineteen-year-olds in my courses, fluent in screens but lacking experience of printed words on a page, now struggle to read it (at first). But, like ship’s captain Robert Walton at the novel’s end, someday each of us will find ourselves facing a monster with nothing to help us but what we already carry in our heads and hearts. The world won’t wait. So let’s get ready. Come read and write with me. Build your capacities to do hard things, your appetite for challenge and excellence. This will make your education meaningful and joyous: wherever you come from, and wherever you are going next.