Being With AI: Six Sessions

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A six-session companion to the Being With AI introduction. Each gathering follows the Being With rhythm of Wonderings, Story, and Reflections—creating space to be known rather than rushing toward answers.

Session 1 — AI and Society

Tell about a time you started something that got a lot bigger than you realised it would.

Tell about a moment someone judged or dismissed you when they hadn't truly seen you.

Tell about an occasion you realised the way a group or organisation was run needed to change to face a new challenge.

I wonder what it's like to face something big and not know what to do.

AI has many huge benefits. It helps with early disease diagnosis. It's great for climate modelling. It speeds up research. It cuts through mundane tasks. It personalises recommendations and travel routes. But there are two kinds of worries. The big one is the least specific. It's the underlying anxiety, never dominant but ever lurking, that humankind may be unleashing the source of its own destruction. Once the moment is reached that AI can reproduce itself without human direction, we cross the threshold from where we control the technology to where the technology controls us. And there's no going back. In his 1797 narrative poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Johann von Goethe tells of an old sorcerer who leaves his apprentice to look after the workshop. The apprentice grows tired of fetching water by bucket, and enchants a broom to do so for him. The floor is soon awash with water. The apprentice can't stop the broom. He cuts the broom in half with an axe. But each of the two pieces becomes a whole new broom, lifting up a bucket and fetching water at twice the speed. Every time the apprentice splits a broom the same thing happens. Eventually the old sorcerer returns and reverses the spell, warning the apprentice about the dangers of invoking powers beyond his control. It's a parable for our time.

But there is a more practical danger. AI is a massive consumer of data, and basically a colossal averaging machine. This has two major downsides. Quickly anything that can't be translated into or represented by data is diminished in cultural value; and anyone who sits outside the mainstream of averaging gets ignored, excluded or rejected. It may be true that some people of a certain ethnic group have a propensity to particular kinds of cancer; but in the hands of AI, rapid generalisations distort the data and fail to render the complexity and diversity of human society. The apparent objectivity of AI masks the way it reflects the cultural assumptions of those who feed it. Meanwhile the voracious appetite for data hoovers up everything to public or private actors that really should remain restricted to individuals themselves. Sophisticated tech tycoons become incredibly powerful not just through engineering genius but by access to and ownership of vast quantities of information about the public at large. Before our eyes, the whole global structure of power is changing.

Harvard Business School professor Ron Hefeitz argues that the authority structure of an organisation is the one that survived the last crisis. He describes a pack of silverback gorillas, where the alpha gorilla is the one able to coordinate food gathering and to defend against a leopard by surrounding the predator and nullifying its threat. But when along comes a human with a machine gun, those skills aren't up to the task, and the social structure of the gorillas changes accordingly. Likewise, the authority structure of civilised societies has been that which required those in power to provide a high standard of service. What's happening in the world right now is a threshold moment equivalent to the appearance among the gorillas of a human with a machine gun. Power is being transferred from elected governments to those controlling digitalisation, artificial intelligence and robotics, and the authority of conventional leaders is being evacuated. The only thing that could limit the overreach of the tech bros is regulation. But AI has no regard for national borders. So we have a paradoxical situation that at the very moment we need global consensus like never before, the rise of populist movements asserting narrow nationalist identity has shifted the political mood away from any such common vision.

Session 2 — Three Stories

Tell about a time you knew in your gut something was wrong and you wanted nothing to do with it.

Tell about an occasion you encountered a new piece of technology and were excited by what it could do.

Tell about a moment you thought something seemed really good, but you were still very cautious about it.

I wonder who you ask when you don't know what to do.

We can divide responses to artificial intelligence into three groups. Let's call them Not on Your Life, Yes, Please, and Yes, But. Each of these groups has an implied story.

The loud shout of Not on Your Life anticipates the moment when AI reaches what's known as the 'singularity,' a point where technological growth reproduces itself, uncontrollably and irreversibly, almost inevitably dominating human civilisation. It has been compared to inviting aliens from another planet to show up and overrun the world and just let them get on with it. The Not on Your Life story isn't one of vigilance, in which governments must put careful safeguards in place to avoid a potentially promising development reinforcing oppressive tendencies already present in society. This is not a story in which some are losers; it's one in which we're all losers. It sees the takeover of the human domain by computers and robots as simply a matter of time. This story often goes hand in hand with a sense of determinism – that technology is unstoppable and will hunt humans down whatever we now do.

The story of Yes, Please is one rooted in science fiction. This is an optimistic Silicon Valley story, by which humans can eventually gain mastery over all limitations. It's a story closely linked to transhumanism – the attempt to extend human lifespan and cognitive capability. Proponents anticipate that people with augmented capabilities will develop into a transcendent species — the 'posthuman.' This is a quest for perfection and a conviction that such perfection can be achieved by harnessing advanced technology to human ability – particularly the human brain. It imagines that we can live forever by transferring our brainpower into a device that doesn't decay. It sees life as surrounded by unnecessary constraints, and AI as a unique opportunity to overcome many of those constraints.

The story told by the third group, Yes, But, isn't fundamentally opposed to AI. Its story is one of how all new technologies tend to exacerbate the power differentials already at play in the world. Most obviously, those who work in roles that computers or robots could easily displace are already wondering what the future means for them. More subtly, computer analysis reflects the data it's given: bias against migrants, children, members of indigenous communities and people with disabilities could quickly be exacerbated rather than diminished by AI, and hardwired into employment screening or police records. And it's certainly possible to tell the AI story as yet another, perhaps the greatest ever conspiracy of humankind to neglect the non-human creation in its quest for its own enhancement. At the simplest level, humans come to depend so much on AI that we can no longer think critically for ourselves, like a person that lives on fast food losing the ability to cook.

Session 3 — What's at Stake in the Three Stories

I wonder what it's like to trust that the future is in safe hands.

Tell about a time you wanted to escape.

Tell about a time you let go of something attractive or valuable because sustaining a relationship was more important.

I wonder what it's like to hope and fear at the same time.

In the Not on Your Life story, what's really at stake is the Christian virtue of hope. Hope says human beings will never create a good outcome to their own story, either individually by concocting their own survival in a robot or collectively by creating an idealised utopia. Instead, God brings the future towards us and ushers us into ultimate companionship with the Trinity, one another and the new creation, in spite of and uninhibited by our selfishness and fear. We can't know if AI will eradicate humankind, but *we can trust that it won't eliminate God.* The truth is that humankind will die out eventually, by external catastrophe or internal folly. But hope informs us that what God has in store for us individually and collectively is so much more than what we now have, and that our ultimate future lies in God's hands, not ours.

Then if we move to the Yes, Please story, what's at stake is the Christian virtue of faith. The Yes Please story is essentially a remix of an ancient tendency to seek eternal survival through escape – escape from the human body, from the limitations of time and space, from the sheer givenness of the world. The inclination to escape isn't a new thing for those obsessed with technological enhancement – it's been there since religion began. What faith says is that *God is with us in and through our created existence*: seeking technological escape by transcending our human limitations won't get us any closer to God or eternity. Christianity fundamentally says we don't get close to God by escape – we get close to God by God in Christ coming close to us. Transhumanism is an impossible project; and, more importantly, even if it succeeded in preserving parts of us, it would leave behind the parts most worth having.

Which brings us to the third story, the Yes, But story. There's a lot that's right about the Yes, But story. Christians affirm what they value about themselves and the world by the way they attend to those most vulnerable in their midst. The Yes, But story's not wrong. It's just insufficient. There's a bigger story, expressed by the Christian virtue of love. The story of love is that human beings were created for relationship – with God, and meanwhile with themselves, one another and the creation. The most important things in life are forming, fostering and restoring relationship. Which means we have a simple test for whether developments in artificial intelligence, or indeed any other product of human invention, are positive or negative: *do those developments strengthen, deepen and enrich relationship*, or inhibit, evacuate and

dismantle it? True, textured and sustainable relationships require dignity, trust, integrity, generosity, sacrifice, kindness, attention, delight – all the words that express the best things in life; all the words that combine to embody what we mean by love. The Yes But approach wants us to legislate safeguards and protocols around AI. That's wise and necessary. But let's not for a moment suppose you can legislate love. That's something we each have to practise, promote and proclaim. Which is why we need church. The church's response to AI isn't to dream up some magic new solution. It's to be renewed in appreciating the significance of its existing core practices: like sharing a weekly meal in which all are equal, all contribute, and all are fed; like caring for the vulnerable in ways that affirm mutuality and dignity; like upholding one another in prayer and practical gestures of solidarity.

Session 4 — AI and Humanity

Tell about a time you felt you weren't needed anymore.

Tell about a time you got a machine to do something you could just as easily have done for yourself.

Tell about a time you wanted to get Google to do something you could only do for yourself.

I wonder what it would be like to feel all your memory was outside your brain in a computer.

The challenge of AI to humanity has two dimensions. One is how rapidly the nature of work is being transformed. Earlier industrial revolutions obliterated blue-collar jobs. AI is hitting white-collar roles. If you're in computer programming, customer service, language translation, finance and investment, journalism or proofreading, you may be living on borrowed time. The eradication of entry-level jobs is inhibiting a new generation from reaching the first rung on the ladder of meaningful employment. Two hundred years ago machines started to do the physical things less educated people had always done; now robots are doing the thinking highly educated humans thought was their domain, and a university degree starts to feel like a vanity project. Work has always been a necessity for society, a necessity for individual income, and a fulfilment of human creativity and sociality. What happens if it stops being a necessity for society, no one really knows. Attention focuses to human dignity: what does it mean when people become dispensable and all that matters is the accumulation of wealth and power for the ultra-rich? It's as if after 200 years of emancipation, half the world's population risks lapsing back into slavery.

But there's more than one kind of enslavement. When people latch on to what AI can do, two things start to happen. First, they ask AI to do things they can perfectly well do themselves. This may be writing essays at university; or it could be working out a recipe with what's left in the fridge several days after the last grocery shop. The less we use our brain cells, the less our brain cells work. The more we let AI colonise our imaginations, the more we impoverish ourselves, and cooperate in our own enslavement. Meanwhile second, the more AI comes to dominate our lives, the more we come to value only what AI can do. AI has no awareness of joy or pain, love, friendship, or conscience, empathy or understanding: to the extent that it comes to dominate our world, these most precious things about existence may cease to matter. I don't know if you've had the experience of trying to remember a conversation with a friend and what they said that seemed so profound and true; your instinct might be to google it, because google tells you the answers to everything you want to know: but it can't tell you the answer to this one. And you feel bewildered and let down and powerless. But what you really need to do is to work your memory harder. The danger is, the more we become addicted to AI, we won't need a memory; until we don't have one. We won't need friends; until we don't have any. We won't need an imagination; until it's gone forever. We won't need creativity; until we've lost it. We'll be enslaving ourselves.

In his 2026 encyclical, Leo XIV points out that technology can either foster participation and justice or exacerbate inequality and exclusion. The question is, does it help us become more humane and fraternal, while respecting our common home and future generations? This is the question facing society and humanity.

Session 5 — AI and God

Tell about a time it felt like you had a piece of technology that could overcome a frustrating limitation.

Tell about a time you felt a sense of your own power.

Tell about a moment you had to come to terms with your own limitations.

Tell about an occasion when you felt you deeply mattered.

While AI presents a new threshold, in the most profound ways it maximises questions that have lingered at least since industrialisation, even since the start of civilisation. What we observe are two stories of creation. For story one, creation is incomplete and flawed. We die, we grow old, we get sick, we suffer, we fail, labour, we are disappointed, we are impoverished, we are ignorant. But behold: here is technology. It can overcome every limitation. It can make us live longer, address disease, provide limitless information, endless diversion, amazing wealth, extensive knowledge, perpetual leisure. The human project is to overcome all these limitations and achieve mastery over our environment. It's an attractive story, and it's important to recognise and appreciate its blessings. The Holy Spirit is certainly at work in this story, leading us to the fulness of life.

But in story two, we have a different notion of creation. Limits are part of the design. Addressing restrictions is fundamental to being human. Compassion and generosity arise from awareness of the suffering of others; endurance and character emerge from experiencing hardship; solidarity and initiative grow in facing enmity and strife. Wisdom, imagination, adaptability and humour all grow when facing adversity. But there's more than that. Christianity is founded on a conviction that the essence of all things is a relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that the universe came into existence in order for that relationship be extended to human beings. Humans find their ultimate fulfilment in relationship: with the natural world, with one another, and most completely with God. Relationships are flawed, fragile and sometimes fail: but they are the closest we get to the purpose of the universe and the heart of God. When Christians worship, they are letting the Holy Spirit engage their souls in the wonder that God seeks relationship in the context of beauty, truth and goodness, but also of sorrow, sin and suffering.

Which brings us to the difference between story one and story two. The technological dream, story one, is a vision that we can replace relationship with something more reliable, and ultimately dwell in a world that doesn't need love. For story two that heaven is a hell. For story two, love is the reason we exist, and trying to bypass it with something more durable and predictable and commodifiable and transferable is a hideous parody of our created glory, that seals us off from God and denies who we truly are.

In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus describes the depth of the Father's love for us. 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?' he asks. 'Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.' The Father observes us minutely and cares for us intensely. You could say the Father receives infinitely more data than any present or future AI. To our periodic exasperation, that love is not habitually expressed in fixing our lives and undermining our human dignity. But Jesus assures us this because we are precious, honoured and loved – not because we are not. 'Even the hairs of your head are all counted.' God loves each one of us, and loves each one of us as

if we were the only one, and each tiny particle of us as if it were the only part. In the end, the only thing that matters is whether we matter: and we matter utterly to God. AI is promising to create a world in which we don't need love. It's not a dream; it's a nightmare.

There was once a computer engineer. He thought the most exciting things in the world were waterfalls, sunsets and mountains. And the most wonderful thing in his life was to share the discovery of such things with his loved ones. So he went into his workshop to amass all the images and descriptions and data on waterfalls, sunsets and mountains from the beginning of digital documentation. And he became fascinated with what he was seeing and the knowledge and learning he was developing. Eventually after 80 years he emerged from his workshop to announce to his loved ones his amazing findings. But his loved ones had dispersed or died. And he was now too old to enjoy the waterfalls, sunsets and mountains. All he had was his data.

The gifts of creation already take us more than a lifetime to appreciate. The relationships that surround us offer us texture and depth and truth and wonder. We can make life simpler, quicker, more sophisticated and more effective with AI. And much good will result, although we'll need to rethink power, democracy, work and equality. But one day, perhaps one day quite soon, we may wake up and realise in the process we've obscured, undermined or destroyed the things that life is really about.

Session 6 — A Challenge to the Church

I wonder what it might feel like to believe we've been given everything we need.

I wonder what we're frightened AI might take away.

I wonder what it might be like to be in a society that fostered healthy relationships.

I wonder what's the most important thing in life.

Artificial intelligence is the product of a world that does not employ faith, hope and love as the metrics by which we evaluate everything new that arises. To be a Christian is to believe that, in Jesus and the Spirit, God gives us everything we need, and that faith, hope and love are the ways we respond to the plenteousness that God has already given us. Some technological developments are healthy, some less healthy: the point is, the way we know whether they're healthy is the extent to which they facilitate faith, hope and love. So AI is testing the church as to whether it truly believes that faith, hope and love are what we're made for. Paul says in Romans 8, 'To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.' If AI is a blessing, it will lead to life and peace.

The development of AI and the crisis into which we've just stumbled, that AI might destroy everything, may yet be a gift to the church in this precise way. Let's take a moment to ponder what it is that we're so terrified AI might take away. Is it our control? That was an illusion anyway. Is it our identity? Our identity is a gift of God, not our own achievement or possession. Is it our existence as a species? That lay in God's hands, not ours, all along. The thing AI really threatens to take away is our precious ability to relate to one another in profound and meaningful ways, replacing it with life as a concatenation of perpetual and calculated transactions. What Christians need to assert and embody and enrich is the quality of their relationships, with God, one another and the creation. AI is showing us the difference between artificial love and real love.

Here lies a question and an irony. The question is, Do we make those relationships the gravitational centre of our lives, right now – or are we already preoccupied with securing control, identity and survival by other means? The irony is, maybe it's going to take the threat of AI to make us realise what's most important in life

lest we lose it. Which means the threat of AI may turn out to be showing us what our lives should really have been about all along. And thus, paradoxically, be an extraordinary gift.