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Likeness

magazine

force of habit

Low Entropy is headquartered in Kwikwetlem First Nation Territory of the Coast Salish people, and in the shared territory of the sə́lilwətaʔt̓ təməx̌, x̌m̌əθǩəy̌əm, Stz'uminus, Qayqayt and S'ólh Téméxw nations.

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About Low Entropy: Founded in 2015, the Low Entropy Foundation is home to free programs and events that focus on personal and community growth through empowerment, authenticity and meaningful interpersonal connections.

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Foreword

The rhythms created by our routines, we get used to them. They become comfortable, but a little too snug sometimes. The repetitions can get a little old, these songs on a loop.

Should we push back by forging ahead?

Is innovation our only hope?

Does fortune truly favour the bold?

I could just stay here though. I could just look deeply into the present. It could be just as rewarding. No?

Our writers ponder the force of habit, and how it can create remarkable things in one place while whittling people down in another. It can be found in the heartbeats of our relationships and the pacing of our thoughts—we want to feel in control so the compulsion seems repulsive, but is it? Maybe it's neutral . . . a force, like any other.

We create patterns, yes. But maybe pull back a bit. They look more like designs from here.

Simon Cheung

Editor, Low Entropy

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“She’s not looking for a life partner to settle down with, nor a lap cat to keep her company. She’s not looking for acceptance either. She’s merely ensuring she keeps herself busy.”

SUE TURI Sue Turi is a freelance painter, illustrator and writer, crafting stories from her empty nest located just outside of Montreal, near the Thousand Islands of the St. Lawrence River. She also enjoys cooking, writing poetry and being au contraire when needed.

The Blanket

Sue Turi

You Don’t Know Love Until It’s Yarn

Ines Roxanne Bourgelais is on her 15th ball of wool.

She’s been crocheting a blanket as a wedding gift for her daughter, who married a level-headed accountant two years ago. She chose the warm colours of a desert sunset as its colour scheme.

Into her 60s, Ines’ nest is empty of kids, but she fills it with comforting things like mammoth crocheting projects.

She’s not looking for a life partner to settle down with, nor a lap cat to keep her company. She’s not looking for acceptance either. She’s merely ensuring she keeps herself busy.

Thirty-two years ago, Ines Roxanne Bourelais had children and exchanged her feathered costumes and dance shoes for office suits and safe shoes that didn’t kill her feet all day long. Secretarial school had brought her down a notch from *Foxy Roxy* and *The Sophisticates* to Ines, divorced mother of two.



Photo by Deborah Hudson

Living paycheck-to-paycheck and job-to-job had forced a brutal reality on her after a life of cabaret dancing, entertaining troops across post-war Europe and one-night-stands breezing in and out of her life as rapidly as doors shutting on draughts. Her partying days dogged her into parenthood, as relationships were formed more with fleeting admirers than with her kids.

Ines examines her work of art with a critical eye: the patchwork of turquoise, pink and mauve spilling over her knees and spreading out across the floor like a Navajo spring carpet. She chooses a large crochet hook to speed up the task, which gives her blanket a stretchy quality.

Unlike having kids, the blanket is an enjoyable task that can be put away when she's had enough or taken out when she's inspired.

Projects like this calm her,

though she doesn't quite know why. As a mother, she was like a headless goose running from one panic attack to the next. She had been a loose wire resisting grounding, or unable to.

Absence Makes the Heart Grow Yonder

Ines, the secretary, typed at 40-words-a-minute, which still comes in handy when she wants to type letters to her daughter instead of texting or calling her. The letters are single-spaced and crammed with news, making a reader's head spin. She jumps between topics, like whether to add wooden baubles to the edges of a blanket, to the lazy mailman leaving packages in the elevator, to a recent round-trip she took to Egypt with her friend Helga. She had always dreamed of visiting Egypt when she was elbow-deep in diapers: *IT WAS FANTASTIC!* Ines gushed.

They ate fresh dates and salads while sailing down the Nile, toured the Valley of the Kings and visited

the pyramids of Giza in 40-degree heat with a local guide who overcharged them, then made a scene about it when they found out. She got to ride a camel and almost collapsed afterward from heat stroke. She didn't get to see the Sphinx, as she argued with Helga over something stupid; she can't remember what, and they parted ways for the rest of the day. She wandered around for the rest of the day until she ended up in a shady market in Cairo buying silver scarab beetle earrings for her oldest daughter, and an Eye of Horus pendant for her youngest.

Pink wooden baubles. They may become a literal pain in the back when turning over in bed and make a loud clacking sound when they meet the floor. *They're too much*, Ines decides. Blankets are meant to be warm, soft and cheery, not instruments of torture. Her mind has already moved on—to the Barbie evening dress she plans on knitting her granddaughter.

As she wriggles herself free from her chef-d'oeuvre to stretch her legs like a fish escaping a net, she realizes how motherhood should be like her blanket,

without the pink wooden baubles.

The blanket is Ines' way to celebrate being a mother after spending years regretting having children and telling them so.

**WENDY
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INSIGNARES** Colombia, 1987. Master of Education, Universidad del Norte. Director of the Revista Letras Vivas. Writer and poet in formation. Teacher and researcher, she has participated in scientific events at the national and international level.

Without you

Wendy Paola Redondo Insignares

A fleeting breeze penetrates my pores, the smell of damp earth shakes my senses.

The proud time passes before my tired eyes, while my mind harbors empty memories.

Gloomy regrets are heard in the distance, unfinished hopes silence my soul.

For: Aurore June

“Good luck tends to knock when you’ve already given up hope on it”

Virelia
Tuhin Talukder

Anon woke up in a room unlike any that he remembered. Soft sunlight poured through a wide window, casting warm patterns across the polished floor. The air felt unusually still, broken only by the occasional chirping of birds. The persistent headache that had weighed on him for months was simply—gone. Rather, he was feeling an unforeseen peace of mind, a strong hope that he now carried the ability to make impossible things happen.

He got out of bed and slowly scanned the room. *What is this place!* The room was tastefully decorated. In the far corner stood a grand piano, just like the one he had dreamed of owning when he was twelve. He walked over to it and sat down on the bench. His fingers moved instinctively, and a tune began to take shape. He believed it would definitely turn out to be beautiful when finished. Anon glanced around for something on which to jot down the notes before he forgot. His gaze settled on the wall calendar. Someone had flipped the calendar page to May instead of March by mistake, he thought.

That’s when a middle-aged woman entered the room, pushing in his breakfast on a trolley. In her other hand, she held a music manuscript.

“I figured someone as creative as you would need a staff book to capture his creation,” she said warmly, introducing herself as Marla.

There was something in her voice—gentle, unwavering—that made her seem like the kindest person in the world.

Anon, without a word, picked up the book and quickly noted the tune still echoing in his mind. Then he looked up at her, his brows furrowed with quiet confusion.

“What is this place?” he asked softly. “And how did I get here?”

“Oh, Mr. Anon,” she said gently, “You remember, you were in the hospital for a while. During that time, someone from The Regal Music Studio discovered some of your work. They were deeply impressed and eventually tracked you down. They arranged this house for you and hired me for your care. And when you’re feeling ready, the studio director would like to meet you, to talk about the possibility of an album.”

“That’s surreal! I had a breakdown from depression after failing as a musician . . . and now *The Regal Music* wants to work with me?”

“Good luck tends to knock when you’ve already given up hope on it, sir,” Marla replied with a warm smile.

A faint twitch played at the corner of Anon’s lips. He returned his focus to the tune. For the first time in



Photo by
Arūnas
Naujokas

ages, he felt himself composing calmly—his mind at ease, unburdened. Glancing around, he saw that the calendar page was flipped to March. Marla must have corrected it before leaving. While composing music, fragments of the recent past resurfaced within him.

After a series of failures in his music career, Anon began to unravel. His savings were running out, and there was no work in sight. Winter had settled in heavily, and the snow outside made it difficult to even meet up with friends, leaving him isolated with his thoughts. Most of his time was spent online, switching between job listings and articles on how to handle anxiety. Every few hours, the thought of ending it all crept in quietly, unwelcome but persistent. To distract himself, he scrolled endlessly through social media. Perhaps due to his search history, an advertisement began appearing on his feed, almost once a minute. Even now, Anon could recall the gentle, female voice narrating the ad:

“In a world that never stops moving . . . maybe it’s time you did. Introducing Virelia, the world’s most powerful AI-driven wellness system that understands you. Because your mind deserves a place of peace. It’s more than just an app. Virelia—Heal. Grow. Let Go.”

One day, tired of seeing the same ad over and over, Anon gave in and downloaded the app onto his

phone. At first, its motivational sermons felt like the usual clichés. But desperate to steer his mind away from the relentless train of negative thoughts, he followed its simple advice, like light exercises and short walks around the neighborhood. Each completed task earned him a few points, unlocking the next level and gradually nudging his inspiration upward. After a couple of months, the app recommended he visit a hospital for some medical tests, which were free for the app users. At the time, Anon felt a surge of confidence. He was progressing quickly, and Virelia boasted a success rate of over 95% in achieving lasting emotional transformation among its users. He had become part of that fortunate majority. And now, here he was, making music again, receiving calls from major studios eager to work with him. They had even provided him with a beautiful home and hired Marla to manage everything around it, ensuring he could focus entirely on music.

The artist visited The Regal Music Studio to discuss the album. To his surprise, the director, Edwin Tucker, turned out to be the warmest person Anon had ever met. He didn’t just offer a mechanical handshake and dive straight into business. Instead, he greeted Anon with a genuine hug and asked how he was feeling. He even inquired about small things, like whether Anon had slept well the night before. When Anon submitted his compositions, Edwin listened with full atten-

tion and admiration. In Anon's experience, high-ranking executives at creative corporations were merely businessmen, not equally admirers of art. But Edwin was quite the opposite.

His appreciation for music surpassed his desire for profit.

Anon's music had finally found its moment. His album was an instant hit, resonating with audiences in a way he'd only ever hoped for. Strangers stopped him in the streets to praise his voice, venues lit up with cheering crowds and every note he played felt like it mattered. For the first time in his life, he felt seen, valued and celebrated. The old weights of doubt and obscurity had vanished, replaced by a profound sense of belonging. This was everything he had ever dreamed of, and now, he was finally living it.

Anon lay in a hammock in his garden as evening settled in, savoring the gentle breeze, watching clouds drift away to reveal the smirking stars and reflecting on how unexpectedly his life had changed over the past few months.

Suddenly, a high-pitched frequency caused his vision to tremble. The sky glitches. Everything flickers black. He jolts upright in a cold metal room, wires attached to his skull. He wakes, *truly* wakes, for the first time in months. But not in the garden. A blinding lamp hangs overhead. He's strapped to a bed in the hospital. His skin is pale, muscles atrophied, veins marked with tiny punctures. Machines hum around him. Tubes snake into his arms and skull. He's not alone. In the dim corner of the lab, a voice whispers,

"The patient has been roaming in the AI-simulated environment for 47 days."

"Took us two months to map his brain before we even got him into the simulation," another voice added.

A doctor leaned in slightly over Anon, checking a nearby monitor.

"But still, his symptoms don't show that we could bring him back to real life. Could we?"

Anon drifted back into consciousness, not fully though. With all his strength, he managed to open his eyes halfway, just enough to make out the sterile glow of the hospital lights and the blurred figure of a doctor he faintly recognized.

"No, no, please don't. You don't understand, that was the only place I've ever felt alive. Let me go back. Please!"

He said it, screaming his lungs out, but none of the noises made it to the doctors.

"Such a dreamer! Waste of space in the real world, if you ask me.

Better to save the resources for someone more useful.

Send him back to his virtual paradise."

The whispering voice came in the light. He turned to the engineer standing nearby and said, "And this time, no mistakes, especially not like the calendar slip. You missed counting his unconscious days during his brain mapping phase last time. Everything should feel flawless, as real as possible."

The second doctor tapped on the panel beside the bed as he began drafting a report for the government. He muttered as he typed, "Another case of population filtration, patient ID# A1029347, marked non-essential."

Anon drifted into a long, deep slumber.

KATY TEMPEL Katy Tempel is a Canadian undergraduate student writer. She has written poems on topics of philosophy, romance and self-discovery. Her poems are featured in *300 Days of Sun*, *Hive Avenue Literary Journal* and poetry anthologies published by *Wingless Dreamer*, and on *Whynot.org*. She has also self-published two children's books. When not thinking about existentialism, she loves to walk her dog Bella, hang out with her friends and family and read thriller novels. She lives in British Columbia.

What I Learned from Papa

Katy Tempel

Children don't know a lot. I still don't know a lot.

However, they must know something as they look around them. When they're younger and learning who to look up to.

Someone to run to when you're scared. If you had bad dreams or want a hug.

Someone to protect you. From the monsters in the bad dreams.

Someone to tell you that you did your best but to get up and try again. And again.

And again. And—

No, just kidding.

Someone to catch you when you fall, from the swings or the monkey bars. Or when you had a bad day.



Photo by Kelly Sikkema

Someone who drives around to get all the limited-edition McDonald's toys so I will have the entire collection.

Someone who teaches you math and how to fix your car.

Someone who knows what good food tastes like.

Someone who wants you to succeed. So they give you the tools, resources and opportunities to do so.

TUHIN TALUKDER Tuhin Talukder is a newcomer to Canada navigating the challenges and joys of building a new life. With a passion for storytelling, he draws inspiration from moments of connection, compassion and cultural adaptation. He enjoys exploring a variety of ideas in his writing, often reflecting on how changes shape us.

Someone who plays Grounders on the playground with you even if it is too small for them, and they bump their head on the roof.

Someone who gives you courage to feel confident and strong, no matter what comes your way.

A superhero: Superpapaman.

Throughout all these years, Papa taught me many things. Lessons, morals, stories, ghost stories. So, what did I learn?

I have learned to push the boundaries of what I'm capable of. To try things outside of my comfort zone. It's always worth trying something new, and to not be afraid of change.

I have learned it's okay to be afraid.

I have learned to fail and get back up again. Because it's okay to fail. As long as you tried your best.

I have learned it's okay to fall sometimes. And to take a break from trying so hard.

I have learned to be grateful and happy for the little things. Like how much fun dolls are to play with, even if they only have one shoe.

I have learned to love challenging things. Because you're not trying if it's too easy. It's fun not knowing everything.

I have learned to appreciate good food. Like fried chicken. And turkey. And steak. Eh?

I have learned to try. And to try even harder to succeed, to use all the knowledge. You have to figure something out, because I can, and I will.

I have learned to save room for having fun and being silly. A good ghost story always has the line "There was thunder and lightning that day, my friends."

I have learned to appreciate life, even though it's hard. And to live by many ancient sayings like, "What are you gonna do?" "It is what it is," and "That's the way she goes." Because those sayings demonstrate what it means to be resilient.

I hope I can be as half as resilient as he is. Though I still don't know where she went, or what "it" is. But I know what I'm gonna do.

I remember a story from when I was three (I think). I was outside in the backyard of our old house, playing in the grass. Suddenly, our old dog ran toward me and plowed right through me, flipping me. I somersaulted in the air and landed back down in a sitting position. Papa said I didn't cry because I was stunned.

I was the first three-year-old to ever do a backflip.

Until today, I have not realized what a great motto this story provides.

No matter what life throws at me, whenever I flip upside down, I will always come right back up.

Happy Father's Day, Superpapaman.

Love you love you.

JAYNE SEA-GRAVE Jayne Seagrave is a BC bestselling author. The ninth edition of her book *Camping British Columbia, the Rockies and the Yukon* was published by Heritage House in April 2023. Over 60,000 of her camping books have been sold. She also writes fiction, non-fiction and freelance articles, and occasionally teaches writing and publishing courses. Recently retired, she spends her free time travelling internationally and in the province she adores, learning the French language, exercising, and writing.

I DON'T LIKE YOU ANYMORE . . .

Jayne Seagrave

Please note that this piece contains a brief, general reference to suicide.

In these times when we learn of a vast proportion of the population report being lonely, and when social media, coupled with our 21st century lifestyle, is blamed for this epidemic (and the mental health problems social isolation creates), it seems I should not be wanting to write on the subject of getting rid of friends. But I have found this to be a seriously perplexing, highly stressful issue. And as jettisoning an individual inevitably involves hurting someone's feelings, and as I also believe I do possess a modicum of empathy and do not willingly want to inflict harm, considering this controversial issue is taking up a significant amount of my waking time.

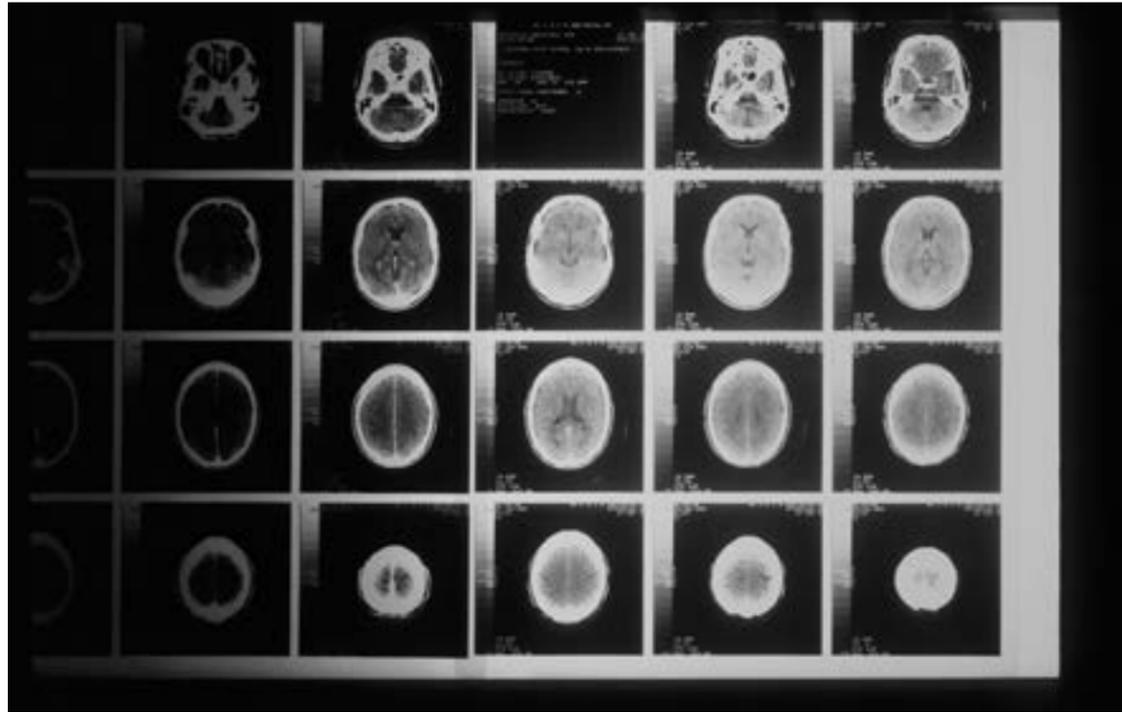
Research has shown there to be only a certain number of meaningful contacts any one person can have: five close friends, 10 acquaintances, 50 superficial. I read of this finding a few years ago and identified. It made a lot of sense. Another common belief is a person should only have seven close friends, all who occupy different roles within their lives, while another suggests there is no right number an individual should have. Friendship, it appears, is a confusing subject. When asked, most state they have between three and five. Men find it more difficult to make friends

than women, and this trend is growing. Suicide rates are highest in men aged 15-30, with men in Canada being three times more likely to die of suicide than women.

In the (fortunately rare) occasions when my life breaks down, when there is a trauma and I feel sad and lost and vulnerable, I am fortunate to have a core of close girlfriends whom I can immediately turn to, and who I know will be there for me. And, I hope, when the tables are turned, they are sure I will be there for them. I treasure these bonds, acknowledging that I am immensely fortunate to have them. I would never forsake these special women.

But I believe not all friendships are built to last. There are some friends whom I have known for years whom I now feel I have little in common with. These contacts have lives that have narrowed to the extent that they have little of interest to say to me anymore, repeat the same boring subjects each time we meet, dwell on the same issues they have been speaking of for years or, at worst, live their lives through their children and grandchildren. Some focus on what they have gleaned from the various social media plat-

Photo
by the
National
Cancer
Institute



forms they ascribe to, and report only on these subjects to the exclusion of everything else. Yes, I find these “friends” boring. They add nothing.

Why should I not terminate these contacts?

Why should I feel so guilty about doing so?

In addition, there are female friends whom I tolerated in the past, often because our children were close, but now, as our families have evolved, with whom I find there is little point in maintaining contact, yet they feel they must. How do I politely say no and not hurt their feelings?

A few years ago, I suffered a serious brain injury, happily making a full recovery (with the exception of losing my sense of smell). I confess I used this incident as an excuse to explain to some why I did not want to see them anymore. I had, I informed them, experienced a personality change, and with it came a desire to reduce social interaction. Such was my desperation to get rid of some friends without causing them pain. I have since learned that this is an identified getting-rid-of-a-friend technique, known as the “It’s not you, it’s me” approach. Obviously I am not alone in wanting to exclude some individuals in my life.

Of course, it works both ways. I feel sure some people whom I have known have wanted to get rid of me. If I try to contact someone on three separate occasions to arrange a rendezvous and they have an excuse each time, I stop trying, and then let them initiate a contact, reading into the situation that this may be a not-too-subtle-hint that they desire to terminate our friendship.

Do not get me wrong, I need friendship. It defines who I am. Friends challenge me, test me and, in desiring my acquaintance, make me realise that maybe I am an okay human being—tolerable, likeable, almost fun to be with. My friends have similar traits; honesty, empathy, senses of humour, understanding of my strengths and weaknesses after decades of knowing me. They suggest, perhaps, the insecurities I have about myself and my traits are ill-founded. Friends show me that I may in fact be a likeable person—

I would not believe that without their support and love confirming it.

But I can only have so many . . .

Rehearse a Poetic Verse

Alex Andy Phuong

The musical power
Of rhythm and rhyme
Can leave indelible marks
Until the end of time,
And the preparation
Involved with artistry
Can result in reformation
As well as transformation,
And by having a choice
To lend a voice,
People will hopefully see
The beauty found within poetry,
So turn a page,
And set the stage,
For the show must go on
Long after the break of dawn,
And by having a role
That one was born to play,
There could be a story
That is like a journey
Towards discovery,
So uncover the mystery
Of the unknown
So that anyone with
The willingness to know
Can fully understand
How the show must go on

ALEX
ANDY
PHUONG

Alex Andy Phuong earned his bachelor of arts in English from California State University, Los Angeles in 2015. Emma Stone inspired him to write passionately after he heard the song “Audition (The Fools Who Dream)” from *La La Land*.

ACE Ace is a volunteer writer at Low Entropy, passionate about the intersection of technology, ethics and society. He writes to explore how human values can guide innovation for a more thoughtful, inclusive future.

The Human Side of AI Alignment: Why Values Matter More Than Algorithms

Ace

Photo
by the
Zhenyu
Luo

We face a critical alignment challenge in artificial intelligence's ever-evolving world. We must ensure that AI systems understand and reflect upon the values of the people they serve. Much of the conversation that is around alignment focuses on code and algorithms, and also models. We cannot afford to ignore the ethical and human side of the equation, as it represents a deeper layer.

AI alignment involves more than some technical puzzle. It invites us to examine what truly matters to us as people within society. What should machines prioritize? In morally complex situations, how should they decide? The answers are not to be found in data alone. They live where our values are.

Why Values Should Guide the Future of AI

At first glance, the idea of human values seems obvious. Once we ask, "Which values?" that quickly becomes complicated indeed. Human values are messy and diverse, and often these values are in conflict. For instance, the value of freedom might



clash with the value of safety in the context of surveillance technologies.

Human ethics, in contrast to computer logic, are driven by context and are fluid. Encoding them within machines becomes a monumental task. Fair in one culture might be offensive in another. Efficient in the eyes of the corporate world could be unjust from the point of view of human rights.

For true alignment, humanization is important—it cannot just be engineered. To align AI with humanity, we must first come to understand ourselves.

The Shortcomings of a Purely Technical Approach

Many AI developers focus on objective metrics, automated feedback loops and reward functions. These tools are useful, yet often miss human ethics' complexity. For example, a system that is designed for minimizing harm might also still perpetuate bias. It only understands harm in statistical terms.

Picture an autonomous vehicle facing a no-win ethical dilemma: even if the algorithm is fairly advanced, it won't truly understand human life unless empathy and moral philosophy have been entrenched in it. Humane choices cannot be expected if humanity is not a part of technology's foundation.

The value alignment problem's crux is this: we're teaching machines to care about things we've not fully agreed upon. The solution calls for smarter humans, not smarter AI.

Human-Centered Design is the Way Forward

To create aligned AI, we need to go beyond programming and into meaningful design. That includes the following:

- Participatory ethics: Involving real people from diverse backgrounds in AI decision-making.
- Interdisciplinary thinking: Bringing together coders, ethicists, psychologists and philosophers.
- Value-sensitive design: Building systems that can flexibly adapt to evolving social norms.

Instead of imposing rigid values onto AI, systems that learn values through context and feedback can be

created by us, like humans growing their sense of right and wrong. This is an approach that allows for dynamic alignment. This can create deeper trust between humans and machines.

Why Everyone Should Care About AI Alignment

AI now exists beyond the labs in Silicon Valley. It is now in classrooms, governments, hospitals and homes. That means aligning isn't merely a tech issue—society must adapt too.

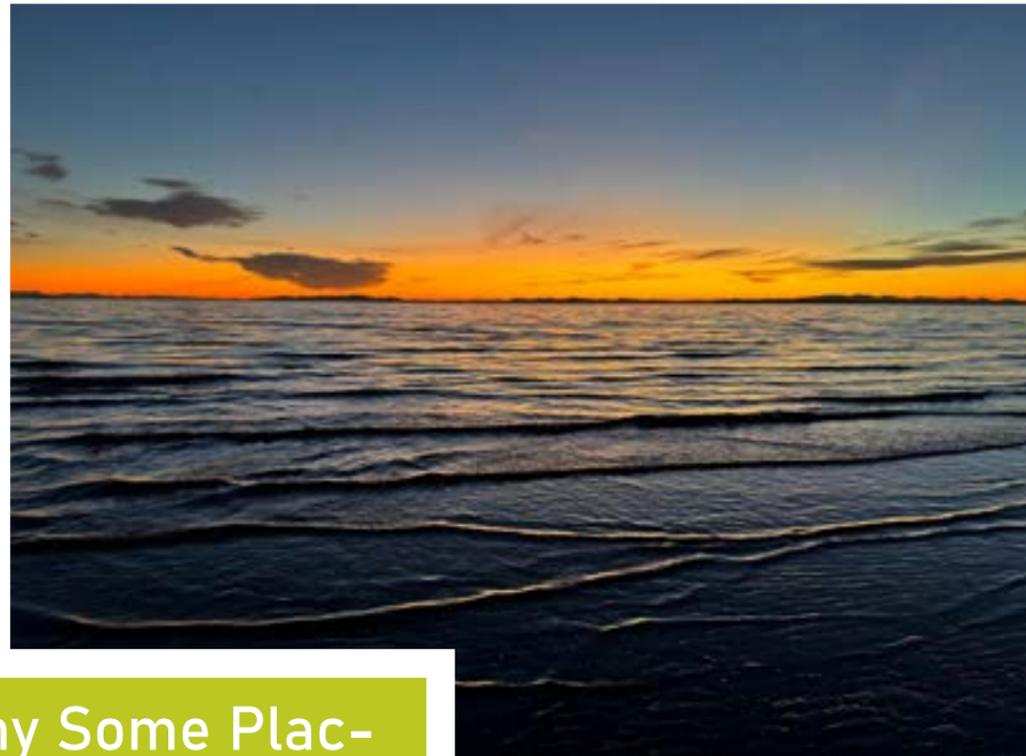
Can AI properly decide on loans, or who receives healthcare first? What content online gets censored? These questions do not only require technical answers—answers by humans are essential.

AI alignment's importance should not be determined by engineers alone. Shaping the values that guide such clever systems is everyone's stake, including students, artists, teachers and parents.

A Call for Ethical Collaboration

AI's future depends upon our ability to align it with human needs. This alignment must extend beyond just human instructions alone. There is a need for humility, reflection, and willingness to listen across disciplines and communities.

Introducing our values into the conversation at the start is needed for a future where technology works with us, instead of around us. AI cannot better the world alone, but it can assist us if we define "better" for it.



Why Some Places Are Special

Balreet Sidhu

This is my first attempt to express myself with images, rather than words. The beautiful array of colours in nature stimulates the senses and is the best medicine from past, present and future tenses.

“I thought it was the sort of thing that only happened to other people.”

My Alcoholic Friend

Jayne Seagrave

Please note that this piece discusses alcoholism.

I thought it was the sort of thing that only happened to other people. I was way too rational, normal, conventional and straight to have an alcoholic friend. But after a long period of denial—with excuses articulated to myself on a regular basis, such as

- she drinks a lot, but only on the rare occasions when we get together;
- she drinks, but can always have a decent conversation;
- no one who drinks to excess would be able to hold down the sort of demanding job she has; and the old chestnut
- don't we all drink on occasions socially and to excess?

—I, and her friends, have reluctantly come to the realization that our friend is an alcoholic.

We are a strong cohort, four women who met over 50 years ago in high school, remaining close friends through thick and thin, sharing a multitude of experiences, cementing our ties over the years. From the age of 18, she always drank slightly more than the rest of us, but this was seemingly not a problem as we encountered life's milestones together: relation-



Photo by the Sergio Alves Santos

ships, careers, partners, marriage, children, aging, death.

We shared. We supported. We trusted.

Despite living on different continents and during some periods seeing each other rarely, our bond was unshakable. We were always there for each other, which is why I am now left to reflect whether her alcoholism is in any way our fault. Could we have done something to prevent it?

I question whether, as friends, we have been negligent in not identifying it earlier. Not tackling the issue head-on when we saw her to be the first to open another bottle of wine during dinner, suggesting another round of drinks in the bar, falling asleep at 8:00 P.M. while the rest of us continued our animated conversations well into the early hours of the morning, slurring her words, tripping and falling over at the end of the night. When exactly did it all start? When does social drinking develop from being just that, to being a dependence?

When, as her best friends, should we have intervened?

Since recognizing her alcoholism, I have spoken to numerous friends and acquaintances about this addiction, trying to seek guidance on what I should be doing, feeling unbelievably helpless, knowing little of this malady. What has surprised me the most is, without exception, that everyone seems to have known someone with the same addiction. Everyone has similar tales of trying to help a friend or colleague or relative, and the feeling of complete inadequacy watching that individual spiral down. Hours of counselling and talking and listening, offering whatever support they can, almost without exception, results in little or no progress. The drinking continues. The alcoholic does not want to hear. The alcoholic prefers to continue. I also learned that an excess of drinking frequently arrives with severe health issues, digestion problems, weight loss, liver complaints, chronic illness, loneliness, death. It appears that having an alcoholic friend is not an anomaly. I am not alone.

The advice I have received is consistent. There is nothing I or anyone else can do. The alcoholic has to recognise their problems and must be committed completely to wanting to address them. Your influence is marginal at best. You can support and facilitate and assist the decision to end their habit, but at the end of the day it is the alcoholic themselves who must want to change and stop the dependence.

I recently heard a podcast describing how being an alcoholic was like being in a bad relationship. You know it is degrading and not good for you, you know you should get out, but you are unable to do so. You know it needs to be addressed, but for some reason you are not strong enough to walk away. I feel not only for myself and my friend, but for her family who are exposed daily to it. Everyone suffers.

And so, I am left feeling helpless. The wonderful woman who was one of my closest friends is a shadow of her former self, not the person I have known well and loved for decades who was always there for me, who provided sensible, intelligent, detached guidance to our close cohort. This person is now unfairly defined in one word. Alcoholic. All I can do is observe from a distance and hope at some point in the near future she recognizes her addiction and addresses it. For now,

I am left at a distance to watch as our friendship fades away.

