

## The 2024 Bailey Morris-Eck Lecture on International Media, Economics, and Trade

Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change

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### What does it mean to be human?

Presence, agency and community in the age of the machines

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## 1. Intro: the conditions of communication

I would firstly like to **thank** Paul, Bobbie, Surya and the [Salzburg Global Seminar](#) for inviting me to give this talk. It's a great honour to be given this opportunity to pay tribute to the work and memory of [Ms Bailey Morris-Eck](#), and to follow in the footsteps of previous speakers such as Dana Priest, Paul Volcker, Pascal Lamy and of course our own [Susan Moeller](#) and [Pablo Martinez-Zarate](#).

It is also a **responsibility** that I do not take lightly.

I **thought long and hard** about what the best way of approaching this talk might be, and decided that today I would not give you any big theories or lots of new data. Without any disrespect to either theories or data – we certainly need both – I instinctively feel that, at this point, we are past those. That is: *before* we talk about any theories or data, I believe we have to ask ourselves a **very basic question**:

### What does it mean to be human?

What does it *actually mean* to be human?

It's a very basic question – almost silly one – but we are facing a critical juncture in time when the meaning of being human, its essence, its properties, its point, is being challenged in multiple ways.

But before getting to *that*, I am wondering:

**Is there any scenario**, really, in which something happens, in this room, during the next hour (and more broadly, during these two weeks), that causes either you, or me, or both of us, to *move* from our original positions?

To change, moderate or enrich our views? To find meaning together?

If not, **if there is no such scenario**, if it is predetermined that no change, not even the most minuscule change, can be created for those participating in a gathering, then there is no hope for this world, because no meeting anywhere will ever have the hope of causing change.

I'm sure we can *all* recall *many* instances when attending a talk, or any kind of gathering, gave us nothing, and I'm sure **we can think of many scenarios** in which *this* gathering creates zero value or meaning.

For example, I could turn out to be boring, or talk nonsense – or you could be tired, sad, busy, preoccupied, absent – and not engage.

*Either* of us could approach this gathering with a closed mind and a closed heart, which means that our intention would not be to communicate - that is, to *commune* - but to affirm our preexisting view of the world, or to broadcast, to project an image to others so as to satisfy our insecurities.

If there is no effort from me to reach you, and if there is no feedback from you, not even the bare minimum – even a negative vibe, even a declaration that you have no idea what I'm talking about - then *this* does *not* constitute communication.

And, by the way, unfortunately, despite of, or I would argue *because of the proliferation of the channels and opportunities* for communication – because of the convenience, ease and speed with which this can now happen, the oversaturation of platforms and messages of all kinds - the great majority of interactions taking place every day carry very little meaning or value.

When the only way you have to preserve text is to carve a stone, then you really think twice about what you're going to spend your time writing.

When your fingers are constantly tethered to Whatsapp and Messenger on your smartphone, then most often you really don't.

Value means price.

Price means cost.

Cost means sacrifice.

How much are we really prepared to sacrifice to listen to others?

Are we willing to get bored and disappointed?

Are we willing to fail and allow others to fail, and still find value in that?

*Especially* in that, in fact, as we mostly learn through trial and error.

So, there are perhaps infinite scenarios in which *this* moment dissipates, leaving no trace behind.

But **if there is one scenario**, one chance out of a million, by which this gathering, *or any gathering*, can have value for those present, then we have to try and **understand the conditions** that create that value.

I would argue that there are three conditions for a valuable interaction, for the creation of a narrative that causes even a tiny amount of change – and a fourth one that unites all three.

As it happens, these three things are also at the heart of what it means to be human.

## 2. Presence

The first one is presence. What is presence?

At one level, presence means that you are **present in the here and now**, in the space; present in your body; making use of all of your senses.

Go ahead, take a deep breath. You are alive.

‘Being present’ means **being alive** and equally importantly, being aware that you are alive – being *consciously* alive.

It means being able to stop and smell the roses, and to feel the rays of the sun on your skin,

and to stand still and take in the view outside of this window – surely, one of the most stunning views on this planet.



Being present means **immersing yourself in the universe** of a great book or shutting your eyes and really listening to a musical recording.

You know, I remember back in the day, 30 years ago, during my summer holidays at a friend's villa in a Greek island near Athens, I only used to have with me four or five CDs, a portable CD player and my headphones.

There were obviously no smartphones, tablets or laptops, the world wide web was just appearing on the horizon, and we didn't have cable or digital TV, only a few national TV channels.

So every afternoon when all my friends took a nap, I would lie down, put on my headphones and listen to my favourite CDs, and immersing myself in the album from beginning to the end, like the composer intended it, it really felt like I was riding a wave, I was letting myself be taken by the harmonies and the melodies, as if I was walking around the orchestra pit.

So, 'being present' means **being attentive and intentional** - paying *attention* with *intention* – and investing in each thing you do, however mundane or everyday that is, and trying to **make the most** of what you have.

Note, the phrase “making the most of what you have” also refers to time, and presence is, also, very fundamentally about time, and **time is about death** – about our limited time here.

It's not about having a lot of material possessions; sometimes poor kids have the most fun because they really immerse themselves in the imaginary worlds that they create.

So, presence also requires **using your imagination** – it means being active and willingly engaging; looking up at the stars and dreaming.

And here it is where it gets complicated and a bit darker, because 'presence' has a **second layer of meanings**. So far, all the meanings I have mentioned are, really, about the self, the ego.

'Being present' also means that you are **there for others**; for example, that you are present in the everyday lives of your family and friends; that you support them and give them your most valuable possession, which is your time here on Earth.

Again, going back to the concept of 'value' and what we value; ultimately, this is proven in practice through our actions, because, ultimately, **love is sacrifice**. If it's easy and painless and doesn't require a lot of you, then its price is cheap.

So, the deeper meaning of presence is being there for others and being engaged in the world around you. It's about commitment and duty. In other words, **presence requires**

**responsibility**; it requires reaching a **state of adulthood**, which means that, not only are you able to take care of yourself, but you can also start caring for others.

## 2. Agency

The second condition is agency.

Earlier, I mentioned the proliferation of digital distractions as a major obstacle to meaningful communication and presence, but, increasingly, over the last few years, we are also noticing another major obstacle – and this is happening globally – especially amongst younger people, and especially after the pandemic.

It is a **sense of malaise**, post-apocalyptic dystopia, a sense of depression and futility.

I want to interrupt myself here and say something that I added to my talk after meeting you. You guys are the reminder that there is hope, that there is a future. You are here, which means that in a way, you are already “there”, you’ve made it. I don’t think I have to persuade you to believe in a better world. You are trying to build it already. I don’t have to show you how to be open and vulnerable and how to listen – because you are already *doing* those things.

Sadly, far too many people – young people and old people, but [especially younger people](#) – are losing hope, and faith, and meaning, and they retreating into themselves. So, the next question is how can we help *them* open and be vulnerable and listen, and engage with others. **And to not be scared.**

The climate crisis, the extraordinary and unchecked global power and poisonous influence of Big Tech, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence, that literally no one asked for and which is hollowing out entire professions and crafts that have existed for centuries, plus: structural economic inequality, the resurgence of populism, extremism and authoritarianism challenging the value of democracy and freedom, and conflicts such as Russia’s invasion in Ukraine and the war in the Middle East, challenging the norms of international law, diplomacy and stretching our capacity for empathy to its limit.

It is **very easy to think** that there is no hope, that we’re all going to die anyway, and to check out – it’s reasonable. **And it’s also wrong.**

The story of humanity [from the caves](#) onwards has been a **quest for agency**, a struggle not just for survival, but *for something higher*; for the development of the self; onwards and upwards; a journey in which we stretch our capacity to think and to create.

[This](#) is a typical example of a **Kouros statue** that appeared in ancient Greece in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. It shows a freestanding young man extending his left leg (there are also

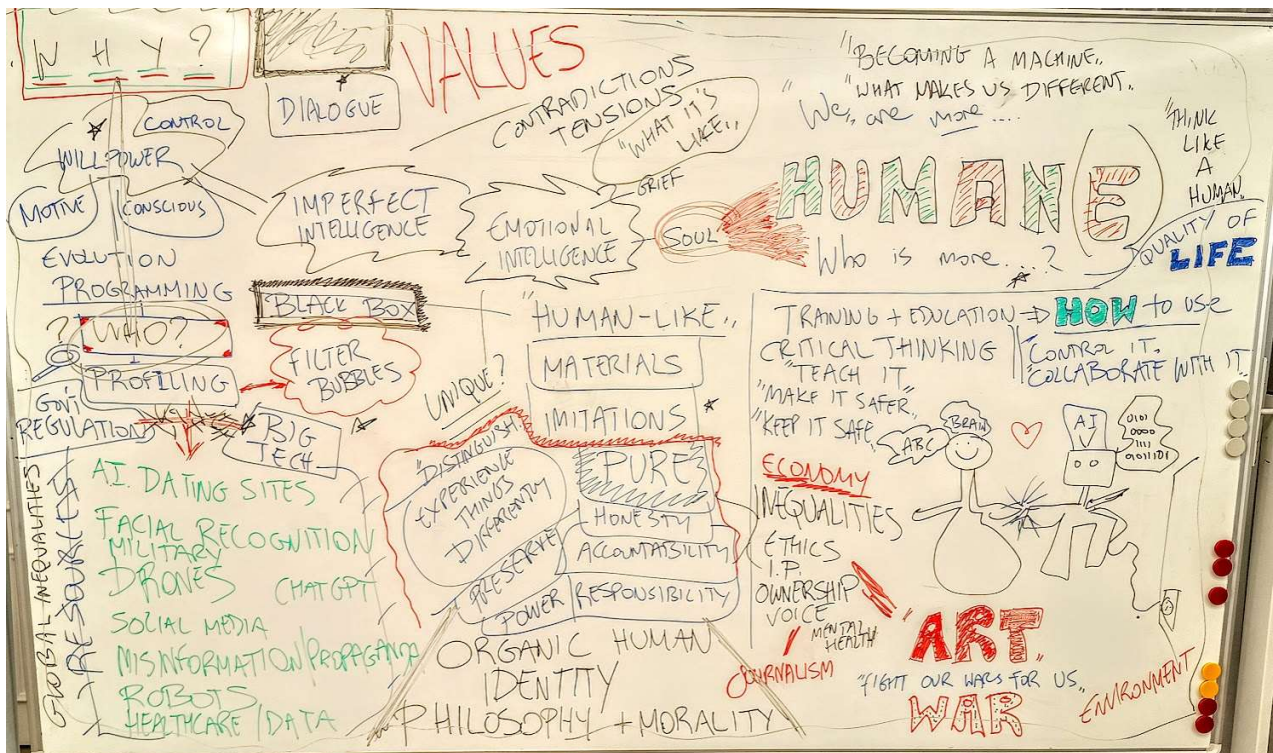
statues of Korai, which is the female version). That step symbolizes the higher ideal of individual human beings literally and metaphorically **taking a step forward**, rejecting the role of humans as passive victims to the God, instead *modelling* the human after a God, Apollo. The message is clear: **he, we, you – have the power** to shape your destiny.

Funnily enough, the exact same message lies at the heart of every major **religion**: the holy texts and those propagating them may be simplifying the choice, framing it as good versus evil, but the **choice** is always there, and it is precisely humans' *active choice* that produces different outcomes.

The whole of philosophy from Socrates onwards is essentially about this: **developing our thinking mind** so as to understand ourselves and others, so as to understand the **moral consequences** of our action or inaction.

And Socrates is changing the world – he is changing the entire course of humanity – *by asking the right questions!* He is not dictating what you should be thinking; he is **asking questions**, which make you think and let you discover the answer – and therefore your own power.

Remember that black box on Tuesday's whiteboard: the most important question is: what is it that we're not talking about? What is it that I am not *seeing*?



And the same message continues through the Renaissance in the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

[Shakespeare](#)'s masterpieces are about everything really, they capture in an extraordinary way the range of human emotions and behaviours, but, if we had the audacity to **reduce Shakespeare's life's work** into one message, this would be it: "the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings" [[Julius Ceasar](#)]:

We, individually and collectively, have agency; we have power; we are responsible for our own destinies.

Shakespeare's work articulates and facilitates **the transition** from pre-modern societies' emphasis on superstition, magic, and the power of the Gods – the idea that your life is tied to a predetermined destiny – to the modern era of science, reason and the Enlightenment, that ultimately leads to the concepts of freedom, equality and individual responsibility that we enjoy now.

We now find ourselves in an equally significant, for the trajectory of humanity, point in history – potentially **a new transition**, in which all of those concepts, those foundations of our civilisation that have stood firm for more than 400 years, are being profoundly challenged.

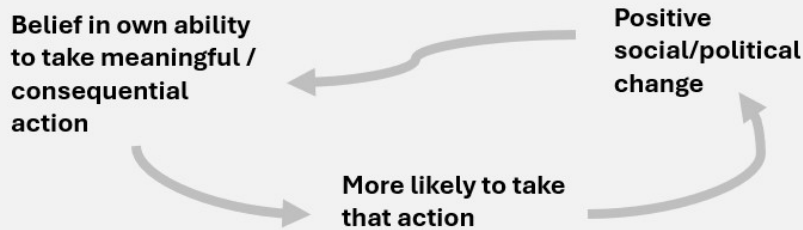
Perhaps the **most dangerous challenge** of them all is not the challenge to democracy or to freedom, because these can be restored through awareness and resistance. The most dangerous challenge is to our own confidence; to our own belief that we can make a difference in the world, that we can make a difference to the circumstances of our own lives and communities; what we, in political sociology, call our sense of **efficacy**.

Every study on civic engagement, political participation and community-building over the last fifty years shows that when our sense of self-efficacy is high, when we believe that our actions have consequences, then we are motivated to engage and participate, and succeed in meeting our goals, which makes us even more confident – **a virtuous cycle of efficacy**. And the opposite is also true: when we feel that our engagement doesn't add value, that it doesn't make a difference, then we withdraw, we become apathetic or cynical, and we fail, which demotivates us even more: **the vicious cycle of inefficacy**.

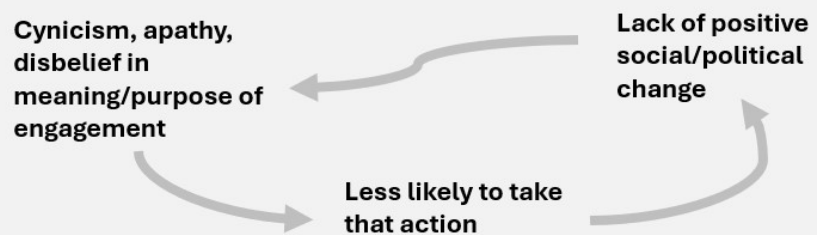
These two cycles aren't just limited to politics or public affairs.

It's the same **in our workplaces, in our social groups, in our families**: when we feel powerless, then we withdraw; we need someone to remind us that we have the power to take our lives in our own hands; the power to change *our circumstances*.

## The virtuous cycle of efficacy



## The vicious cycle of disempowerment



And do you know how this starts?

It starts with having the dignity and the motivation to get up every morning, make your bed, wash yourself and take as good care of your mind and body as you are able to. And then it continues with having the energy and the dignity and motivation to take care of your home, however rich or poor you may be; to keep it clean and welcoming and happy. And then outwards from there.

### 3. Community

And that brings me to the third and last component of human nature: community.

Our need to belong, to be part of a social group, is perhaps the single most profound, the **deepest human need**: the need for connection, for communication.

This is the reverse image of our **deepest human fear**, which is the fear of the abyss.

Why are we so scared of the abyss?

We are scared of it because it's: dark; vast; and lonely;

[**dark**] it is devoid of content and stimuli that can satisfy our senses;

[**vast**] in it we feel trapped;

[**lonely**] and, worst of all, really this is the worst of all three, it is devoid of the presence of others.



Let me ask you a question; or rather: let me pose a **slightly macabre dilemma**:

- Would you rather die knowing that humanity, including your loved ones, are safe and prospering?
- Or would you rather live, safe and catered for, but on a planet devoid of other people?

You see, **our need for connection and love is deeper than our need for survival**; (in fact, a number of things are more important to us than survival, but let me come back to that in a bit).

The **tragic irony** of human communication in the digital age is that at a time when we have in our hands the most powerful and effective means of human communication, we feel more profoundly lonely than in any other time in recent human history.

And in a further dramatic **plot twist** worthy of a Netflix thriller, the *very same tools* that are supposed to help us come together are isolating us.

However, it is also true that, thanks to these same tools, there is greater potential for younger generations, in particular, to develop their **emotional intelligence** perhaps more than ever in human history.

I am filled with hope when I see my students, my friends and my friends' kids who are in their teens and twenties being able to articulate their emotions in ways that even my generation, let alone my parents' generation, has been unable to do.

Now, at the heart of this need for belonging lies a **very delicate mechanism** through which we associate with others. That mechanism is so fragile, because at any point something could happen that might lead to us being kicked out of the community.

I have explained [elsewhere](#) how *shame* lies at the heart of violence; there is a compelling body of work effectively proving that behind every single incident of anger and violence, verbal or physical, individual or collective, lies an 'offending act', or source, of humiliation or shame.

So, if the root of anger and violence is shame, what is the root of shame itself?

That fear – the fear of *shame* – is driven by two even deeper, primal fears, which are related to each other, and which in my ongoing work I have nicknamed 'the Abyss':

- the **fear of losing control over one's fate** (which relates to the loss of agency that I described before) and which to use psychoanalytical language we might call "the death of the self";
  - o think of how **ashamed** we feel when we lose control of our bodily functions or bodily liquids, but also how **angry** we feel when we can't

make sense of things; when we can't understand the world around us (e.g. dementia or epistemological gaps); we feel **powerless**.

- the second driver is the fear of being ostracised, of being rejected by the community; of being left alone in the Abyss; which we might call "**social death**";
  - o think of some of your own **nightmare scenarios**, like walking late into a lecture and spilling your coffee all over someone, or doing something that is so taboo, socially, that it automatically means your exclusion from the community.

One of the fascinating and helpful definitions of shame is "*being seen (interpreted) in a way that is different to how you want to be seen*".

We crave and yearn to be *seen* by others...

...and by 'seen' I don't just mean to be visible and recognised, although that, too; we want to be recognised, but also to be *read*, to be *interpreted* in a particular way; in the identity that we have created for ourselves.

We want to be **respected**, and every instance of disrespect, from any other human being, however insignificant, carries with it a mortal, preverbal, primal *fear*: that of **society rejecting us**.

And it is exactly the same thing with inequality and injustice: we secretly resent those who claim to be better, morally superior, smarter, richer or more goodlooking than us, because **we are scared**; we are afraid that their superiority would equal our inferiority; there's the threat of being socially excluded, again.

Think about it: at the root of jealousy and envy and hatred lies *fear*.

We would be stunned if we could find out how many high-achievers – including dictators, pop stars and tech bros – are driven by a profound fear of rejection, inferiority, social isolation and shame; to us they may look that they are claiming superiority, but, really, they are **trying to run away from inferiority**; they only want to be loved and to not be socially isolated.

It is the irony of human history that so much scientific, technological and social progress has been achieved by people driven by deeply pathological motives.

And, by the way, in many cultures across space and time, people voluntarily engaged in duels or committed ritual suicide because they saw honour and pride – their own or of their family – as more important than life itself.

So:

Presence, agency and community. These are the core prerequisites and functions of communication, of what it means to be human.

And they are all, *all* of them, being profoundly challenged.

#### 4. Big Tech

This is where my story gets darker:

Technology and digital media have brought us many, *many*, wonderful benefits and miracles – from science and medicine to the potential for people all around the world to get to know and experience the world around them – and it frustrates me that we don't get to talk about these benefits enough, because the risks and the destructive effects are more urgent.

Yet, apart from those many benefits, digital technology and digital culture has also profoundly eroded our confidence in our ability to create change.

Let me ask you this:

How would you feel if I used this talk to

- snoop into the most private aspects of your life
- collect your data
- sell it to advertisers
- develop algorithms that are specifically designed to keep you addicted so that you waste time and are unable to do anything else
- manipulated your emotions so as to increase my profit
- stirred hatred in this room pitting people against each other
- used my talk to promote fake news that will harm your health and security
- and made you feel worthless and powerless? If I *dehumanised and objectified* you?

Big Tech companies and social media platforms like Apple, Google, Amazon, Spotify, Facebook/Meta, X, and TikTok to name but a few,

have **poisoned our democracy** and ripped up the fabric of our society;

they have **created unaccountable systems** and **secretive algorithms** that **manipulate our emotions** for profit – they have literally ran A/B experiments manipulating users' emotions to increase engagement;

they have created a **mental health epidemic** amongst teenagers and children across the world, with rates of depression, anxiety, body dysmorphia, eating disorders and suicides rising dramatically over the last 12 years, roughly since Instagram reached mass adoption levels;

they have destroyed the ethos, practices and business models of **journalism and the creative industries**, having no regard whatsoever for the **public interest**, and making it almost impossible to make a decent living as a professional journalist, creative writer or artist;

they have contributed to urban centres and public services becoming **wastelands** as they Hoover billions from national economies and stash them into **tax havens**, and as internet users disinvest from their engagement in public spaces, preferring instead to spend most of their waking time **staring at a screen**;

they have knowingly colluded with convicted criminals and authoritarian leaders such as Putin and Trump to create **civil strife** and promote semi-fascistic ideals, for example, allowing Russian hackers to spread misinformation and disinformation and incite racial hatred by promoting posts from extremists during the Black Lives Matter protests;

they have stretched, manipulated or abused every aspect of the legal and tax systems so as to gather, use and sell all kinds of users' personal information and **private data**;

and no one seems willing or able to stop them.

If a government had done all that, there would have been an uprising; a revolution. Why is there no revolution today? I invite you to think about that.

Let me be clear – and honest.

I have personally benefitted to the utmost from the internet and from social media – perhaps more than anyone in this world. Eighteen years ago I met the love of my life through our blogs. For 20 years I was able to live away from my home country and not just still be in daily contact with my family and friends, but build a whole career and portfolio in academia, journalism, politics, publishing and filmmaking, and it was all done thanks to the internet.

And yet, I have no hesitation in saying that platforms and applications,

such as a X, which reduces human communication to soundbites,

Instagram, Facebook and TikTok with their addictive algorithms that get us hooked on lethal junk food for the mind and for our time,

Tinder and Grindr which reduce complex, beautiful, unique, three-dimensional human beings into profile pictures, labels, tags and 120ms of shallow judgment, *for profit*,

are **technologies of alienation and, ultimately, dehumanization** that have opened a path for mass destruction.

*This* is how genocides start: when our empathy becomes eroded over time; when we become cynical and closed to ourselves.

Campaigns of dehumanisation have always depended on two techniques:

*the claim of inevitability*, implying that human resistance is **futile**, i.e. that individual humans have no agency because the emerging force is so powerful as to be **unstoppable**, so just embrace it already because you don't have a choice.

and the strategy of *dissociation*. Dissociation is when you disconnect, alienate and divide people, so that they don't see the connections between their self and others, between historical periods and geographic places and cultures and areas of human activity.

**Dissociation and alienation lead to depression.** Depression leads to resignation and apathy. Apathy leads to acceptance and submission.

You might say that we are ultimately responsible for our own choices. We choose to use these platforms in the way that we do.

Yes, we *are* responsible for our choices.

Yes, these corporations and platforms *are* merely weaponizing and amplifying the preexisting flaws of human nature by appealing to the lower common denominator of our hearts and minds.

But the epidemic of loneliness and mental health is **not an accident**.

It is a carefully designed and beta-tested **strategic campaign** aimed at making you feel that your actions do not have consequences. It is a **strategy of mass disenfranchisement** in which the more apathetic, withdrawn and resigned you become, the higher the profit for Big Tech companies.

And now, we have **Artificial Intelligence** – which I repeat, nobody really asked for.

Some aspects of generative AI in particular are fuelling the vicious cycle of inefficacy, because they're making us question the point of *doing anything*; of *learning* anything; the point of sacrifice and persistence; a lifetime of learning and personal development, if everything can be done faster and better by AI.

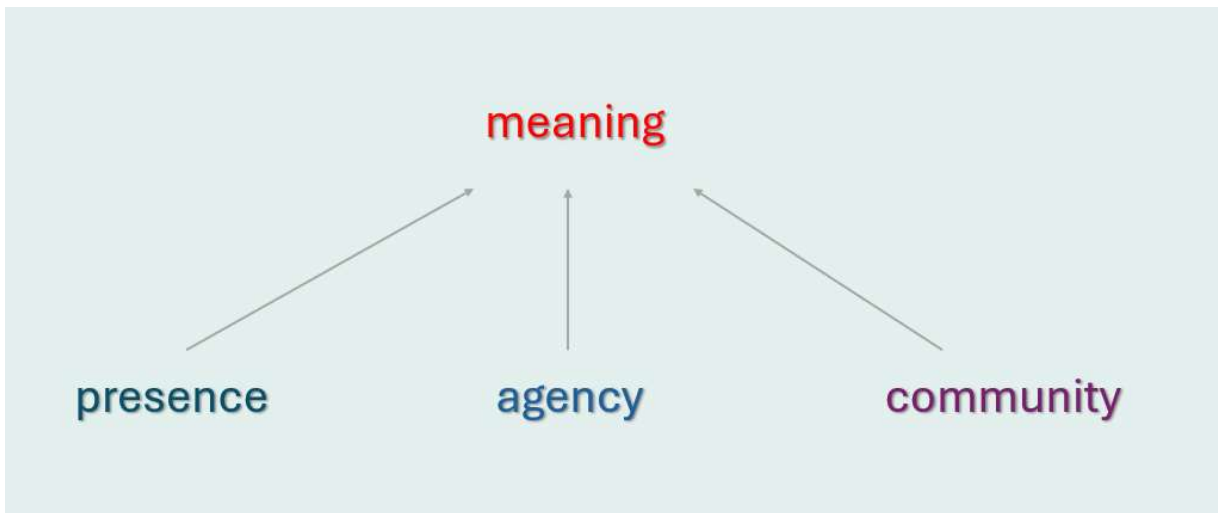
By the way, if there is one thing you can do to resist this emerging culture, then that is to value persistence and the difficult road of trial and error.

History will be as cruel with those who are engineering and profiting from all this as they are in the present. And it will look unfavourably on all of us, in the same way that we now judge those who, during past times of mass disasters engineered by other humans, sat idly, passively or cynically, without doing anything to change the trajectory of history.

## 5. What it means to be human

I said earlier that our need for love and belonging is stronger even than our need for survival.

There is another need that is also stronger than the need for survival, and that is **the need for meaning**.



Studies have shown that people prefer to be given electric shocks than to experience boredom; millions of people, men and women, have sacrificed their lives for causes they believed in, that is, causes – such as freedom or democracy or their faith – that they assigned meaning to.

**Finding meaning** in something gives **purpose to your existence** – to your *presence*.

Finding meaning, **making sense** of the anarchy, chaos, violence, injustice and unfairness of the world is the only thing we have:

Why does one child die from poverty or war and another one gets to live a long, happy life?

Why does one person become a hero and another one stays at home scrolling?

At the heart of not just STEM, but also social inquiry, lies our yearning to make sense of the world, **to attribute cause and effect** – and, through that, to **reassert our agency**.

Because if there is no logic in what's happening around us, then clearly we are powerless. We can only exercise *agency* if we understand **the rules of the game**.

The stories in our mind – the memories, the hopes, the values – are, quite literally, all we have; stories are the one thing that no one can take away from us, even if we are lying dying on a battlefield or alone at home.

Stories, at least the good ones, contain sadness, grief and regret; that is how we grow. We only learn, not when we shield ourselves from uncomfortable feelings and experiences, but when we step outside our comfort zone.

**Take a moment** to think of the **people you love the most** in this world. I would take a bet that when you think of them, the things that melt your heart and move you are not their perfections, but their *imperfections*: their flaws, their silly little habits; their delusions; their blindspots.

We love that they open themselves up to us, that they become vulnerable, which, incidentally, is *the exact opposite* to this alienating, dehumanising culture of **narcissistic presentation** on social media, in which everyone looks perfect and leads perfect lives.



**Sharing other people's pain and suffering**, and remembering those who are not around, is not just our responsibility; it is a *privilege*, because it means we are alive and well enough to do that.

This includes challenging ourselves to watch so-called “heavy” movies: documentaries and dramas about others;

it also includes visiting some of the most horrifying and heart-wrenching places on Earth, like the Mauthausen Memorial next week, and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial – which I personally found two of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

We try to **shield ourselves from inconvenient truths**, from those whom we disagree with, those whose face, race, sexuality, ideology, ethnicity or other marker of identity we object to; that trigger us for whatever reason.

Yet, **accepting imperfection and difference** is essential to our humanity – and this is the hardest when it comes to recognizing the humanity in those who have harmed us, individually or collectively.

What happens when we **reject our human nature** – when we promote the idea that everyone has to subscribe to a pure or idealised version - *our* version - of what it means to be human?

This is how intolerance and dehumanization get born; it is what led to the Eugenics movement; what gives rise to totalitarianism and religious and ideological dogma; it is what facilitates genocide; it is what facilitated the Holocaust.

The **story of this place**, of this Seminar, of this haven for the mind is precisely that:

A story of people from conflicting backgrounds coming together, sitting together, and agreeing to disagree, and treating each other with the respect that we have to afford, not just to privileged people gathering in a European palace, but everyone - and when I say everyone, I mean *everyone*: the hero and the villain.

Because we are all human, and being human has its **own innate self-worth**.

It automatically affords us with certain universal rights, that were put in place after WW2, and that we collectively articulated after millennia of evolution, and death and suffering.



We can't afford to forget these things.



We can't afford to go back.

And we can't afford to let a few deluded autocrats and tech bros hijack this wonderful thing that is technology and continue to destroy the fabric of our societies, and the quality of our individual and collective lives.

## 6. Reimagining the soul of media

The subtitle of this Academy is “**reimagining the soul of media**”.

So how do we *do* that? How can we get past this dark age? How do we safeguard humanity while making the most of technology? How do we literally *reimagine* media?

### Reimagining the soul of media: the four tests

- Does it help us become more **present**, or does it suck all the oxygen out of our lives, making us waste away our days?
- Does it give us **agency**, or does it take away? Does it make us truly freer, or does it subjugate us?
- Does it help us build, sustain and experience **community** or does it hollow it out, destroying the social fabric?
- Does it serve our core **values**? Does it add meaning and purpose to our life, or does it take it away?

If presence, agency, community and meaning are the four things that make us human, then these are **the four tests** that we can use to determine whether a technology is serving us or oppressing us:

- does it help us become more present, or does it suck all the oxygen out of our lives, making us literally waste away our days?
- does it give us agency or does it take away agency? Does it make us truly freer or does it subjugate us?
- does it help us build, sustain and experience community or does it hollow out communities, destroying the social fabric?
- does it serve our core values? Does it add meaning and purpose to our life or does it take it away?

If an existing, emerging or potential technology or platform doesn't meet these tests - not in a designer's mind, but *in real life* - then you do not have to tolerate it.

Just let me repeat that: **you do not have to tolerate oppression.**

You do not have to tolerate **fear** about your career and your future.

You do not have to tolerate **anxiety** about the future of your human existence.

Do not let them tell you that you have to accept a **degradation** of your existence because it's inevitable. **Nothing**, apart from death itself, **is inevitable**. History has not been written yet, and anything can happen. Anything, positive or negative. And *that* is beautiful.

So, despite the doom and gloom, you are **present**, you are building **community**, and you have **agency**: you have the **choice** to remain free, to resist oppression in your mind and in your body.

And as we've seen in Ukraine and elsewhere, freedom sometimes comes with a **terrible, heart-breaking price**. But *it is a price worth paying*, because it is in freedom that we, humans, have found the highest form of **meaning**.

You have the power to write the collective story that will get us out of this mess.

I mentioned at the beginning that presence, agency, community and meaning are the conditions of human communication and the truth is that sometimes human output fails to meet these tests, and technological output succeeds. We have to raise our game to meet the challenge. We have to reassert our humanity.

The question we have to ask ourselves is:

How do I have to grow to meet this moment?

If you are ever looking for inspiration or strength or resilience, I recommend turning to this **wonderful universe** that we call history, and literature, and philosophy, and art. We are literally sitting on top of an Atlantis – millennia of human thought, stories of people who made it through adversity, through times that are infinitely harder than our time.

It is very reassuring to **step back**, to get out of the present moment and look at human history from a distance. It reminds us that we are **not alone** in this journey.

So, we resist the forces of *dissociation*, through the force of *association*.

I love that word because it doesn't just mean the coming together, but it also means the cognitive process of making linkages between things that are seemingly unrelated: we call this "**free associations**" or train of thought, and it takes us to the subconscious and the unconscious, and it's done through art and poetry.

So, jump on the train of your imagination, and associate in your mind, and with others, and you will be absolutely fine.

Thank you.

**Further viewing:**

*Essence* (2018), <https://www.essencethemovie.com/>

*Fellows Hall* (2023), <https://vimeo.com/849266268>

<https://www.edgeofthepresent.com>