I BELIEVE IN YOU

Love, Belonging, and What Humans Are For When Machines Can Do the Work

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PART I

THE WOUND

CHAPTER 1

The Best Words

In January, a few days after my life had come apart, I walked into a private gathering of dozens of CEOs leading some of the fastest-growing technology companies in the world. They were founders, investors, operators - people who had spent years becoming very good at turning ideas into things that actually existed. There was a question on the screen: What are you thinking about doing this year that could be potentially huge, but carries potentially huge risk?

Someone answered first. It was about business. I don't remember the details anymore. I remember that the answer felt normal. Of course it was about business. That's what rooms like this were for. We talked about markets, products, capital, hiring, margins, artificial intelligence, growth, acquisitions, competition - the thousand complicated problems involved in building something that did not exist yesterday and convincing enough people that it should exist tomorrow. Then I took the microphone.

"I think I'm thinking about disrupting religion."

The room went quiet. I should explain what I meant. I did not want to start a religion. I did not want followers. I definitely did not want a cult. I wasn't even particularly sure that religion was the correct word. I was bothered by something simpler. Why did the smartest groups of people I knew gather constantly to think about how to make better corporations, while almost nobody gathered with the same seriousness to think about how to make better ways for humans to live together? Why was religion one of the subjects you weren't supposed to bring up at dinner? Why was it perfectly respectable to spend an afternoon discussing how to increase a company's margin by three percentage points, but vaguely dangerous to ask whether humanity had learned anything new in the last two thousand years about loving one another?

So I kept talking.

"What would we do if we found the best words?"

Everyone in that room was trying, in some form, to find better words: better positioning, better advertising, better sales, better recruiting, better investor stories, better explanations, better ways of making another human being see what we saw. Words change value. Take acetaminophen. Put it in one bottle with one set of words around it and it is generic acetaminophen. Put essentially the same active ingredient in another bottle, build decades of trust and recognition around the name Tylenol, and people may willingly pay much more for it. There are perfectly reasonable explanations for that. Trust has value. Distribution has value. Quality control has value. Familiarity has value. Brands can reduce uncertainty.

But I was trying to push the question past its comfortable answer. Suppose you became extraordinarily good at persuasion. Suppose you actually found the best words. Would the highest use of that ability simply be to create the greatest

margin? Would we use our understanding of human beings to get more money for the same shit? Was that really the game? I used harsher language than I'm using here. You can probably imagine the silence better now. The important thing is that I wasn't standing outside the room accusing everyone inside it. I was in the room. These were my peers. I liked these people. And if anything, years around entrepreneurs had made me suspicious of the caricature that successful founders were primarily motivated by greed.

From where I sat, many looked almost absurdly overcommitted to the welfare of the groups they had created. They had employees whose mortgages depended on payroll arriving, customers who had trusted their promises, investors who had handed them capital, families absorbing years of uncertainty, and reputations attached to outcomes they could only partially control. If everything worked, some of them might become enormously wealthy. They knew that. But I had a hard time believing money alone could explain why someone would tolerate the journey required to get there. A simpler explanation often seemed to fit better: they cared. They had built tribes, and those tribes had become part of them. The company might legally belong to the founder, but after enough years the founder could seem strangely bound to the company. There were people to protect, promises to keep, a mission that had somehow become personal.

Maybe we weren't a room full of selfish people trying to extract more from humanity. Maybe we were a room full of mostly decent people trying to do good through the most sophisticated coordination technology humanity had given us: the corporation. If you want to make a better battery, humanity has built an extraordinary operating system for you. You can incorporate, raise capital, recruit people, assign ownership, measure performance, borrow money, purchase equipment, create incentives, advertise, sell, distribute globally, govern disagreements, reward success, and try again. There are laws for it, schools for it, books about it, entire professions dedicated to helping you do it better.

Now imagine that your objective is different. You want people to trust each other more. You want parents and children to tell each other the truth without fearing the end of the relationship. You want people to disagree without deciding the other person is evil. You want lonely people to become less lonely. You want generosity to spread. You want someone who has failed terribly to believe that their future is still larger than their worst decision. You want a civilization in which people increasingly believe that other humans want good things for them.

Where is the operating system for that?

Religion has attempted pieces of it. Families attempt it. Schools attempt it. Recovery groups attempt it. Friendship does it accidentally. Governments sometimes try. But compared with our machinery for coordinating capital and labor, our technology for coordinating love can look remarkably primitive. I didn't have that language yet. All I knew was that something about the

allocation of our attention felt strange. Some of the most capable people I knew were spending their lives optimizing organizations. Who was optimizing humanity? The room was still quiet. I couldn't know what anyone was thinking. Maybe people thought I was insulting them. Maybe they thought I'd lost my mind. Maybe they agreed but didn't want to be the first person to touch something that sounded religious. Maybe the question was simply too large to answer between coffee and the next agenda item.

Then someone spoke.

"I agree."

Two words. Nothing had been proven. No argument had been won. But the room changed. The idea had become safer. One person had gone first. I didn't realize it then, but I would spend much of the year thinking about that moment. Not religion. Not corporations. The silence - and what happened when one human being broke it.

* * *

At the time, I thought I was searching for better ideas. I now think I may have been searching for better conditions under which people could hear ideas they already understood. There is a difference. Human beings know an enormous amount about how we should treat one another. Most religions have some version of generosity. Most parents tell their children to be kind. Most schools teach sharing before algebra. We praise honesty, forgiveness, courage, curiosity, loyalty, compassion, and service. There is no global shortage of sentences telling humans to be good. Yet we repeatedly fail to behave the way we claim to believe people should behave. That can lead to a fairly depressing conclusion: maybe humans are just bad at being good.

I began wondering whether there was another possibility. Maybe we're attempting to solve the wrong problem. Maybe the interesting question isn't Why don't humans know what is right? Maybe it is What makes doing what we believe is right feel dangerous? Consider something completely ordinary. You are in a meeting. Your boss proposes an idea you believe will fail. You know honesty is good. You know the company supposedly values candid feedback. You know telling the truth now might save everyone months of wasted work. And you say nothing.

Why? Perhaps because your brain is running more than one calculation. One calculation concerns the idea. Another concerns you. If I say this, what happens to my place here? Will my boss think I'm difficult? Will everyone else think I'm stupid? Am I missing something obvious? Will I lose status? Will I be left out of the next meeting? Will somebody remember that I challenged this person when promotion time comes? Now the silence isn't irrational. It is solving another problem. Or imagine a teenager lying to a parent. The parent sees a moral failure. The teenager may see a belonging problem: If I tell you the truth, who will I become in your eyes? Or imagine someone refusing to change their mind after being shown evidence. Maybe they aren't only protecting an

argument. Maybe the belief is connected to friends, identity, status, religion, family, or community. Changing the belief may have a social price.

Or imagine someone pushing away the person they desperately want close. What looks irrational from outside can sometimes look different if closeness itself creates the possibility of rejection. None of this means every behavior is secretly caused by one thing. That would be another overly convenient theory. It means I started becoming interested in a variable that many of my old explanations had treated as background noise: belonging. Not simply whether people have relationships, but whether they believe their place inside those relationships is secure. That eventually led to a question so simple I almost distrusted it.

Do you choose me? Do you still choose me?

A child can understand those questions. So can a spouse, an employee, a founder, a citizen, a religious believer, or someone standing in a room full of people wondering whether it is socially safe to say, I agree. But even that wasn't quite enough. Because you can be chosen without being believed in. Someone can choose you because leaving is inconvenient, because you're familiar, because they don't have a better option, because you are useful, because you have money, because you have status, or because you happened to be standing there when teams were picked. There is another question hiding underneath. A question I now suspect may matter even more.

Do you believe in me?

Not: Do you think everything I say is correct? Not: Will you trust me no matter what I do? Not: Will you remove every boundary because you love me? Belief is something more demanding. It is a model of another person's future. It says: I can see possibilities in you that are not visible in your current circumstances. A good parent knows this feeling. Your child can be wrong. They can fail. They can disappoint you. They can make choices you would never make. And still you can look at them and think: I know there is more in you than this moment.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts humans give one another is the experience of being seen that way. Perhaps one of the greatest fears is losing it. And perhaps a surprising amount of human behavior begins to make more sense when we remember that we are not merely organisms accumulating resources. We are organisms constantly forming models of where we stand in the minds of other people. That question would have been interesting at almost any point in human history. Artificial intelligence may be about to make it urgent.

* * *

For hundreds of thousands of years, human beings needed other human beings to survive. The specific arrangements changed enormously, but

dependence did not. Food had to be found. Children raised. Threats detected. Knowledge remembered. Shelter built. People cared for. Later we invented farms, cities, markets, factories, offices, universities, and corporations. Eventually we created jobs so specialized that a person could spend forty years becoming exceptionally useful at something almost nobody in human history had ever needed before. Work became much more than a way to obtain food. It became a way to answer another question: What am I for? Your job gives you money. But it may also give you status, routine, friends, problems, a title, people who ask for your opinion, a reason to get dressed, and evidence that something would be different if you didn't show up tomorrow. We tend to bundle all of that together and call it employment.

Now imagine machines gradually becoming capable of performing more of the work. The timeline is uncertain. The endpoint is uncertain. Nobody knows exactly how far artificial intelligence and robotics will go. But we don't need certainty about the destination to notice the direction of the question. What happens if human economic usefulness becomes less scarce? Most of the public conversation immediately goes to money. Who owns the machines? What happens to wages? Do we need universal basic income? Universal high income? How do people afford housing and food? Those are important questions. But there is another problem hiding underneath them. Suppose we solve the money. Then what? Imagine telling someone: Good news. Nobody needs your labor anymore, but don't worry. You'll receive everything you need. They may be relieved. And then, eventually, they may ask: Does anybody need me?

Those are not the same question. A civilization could solve material scarcity and leave human beings starving for significance. We might arrive at abundance with all the psychological machinery of scarcity still running: infinite chairs, eight billion people still fighting to sit down first. That possibility frightens me more than unemployment itself. But it also suggests another future. Maybe the loss of compulsory usefulness does not make humans worthless. Maybe it finally gives us an opportunity to separate the two. Maybe we spent thousands of years learning to make humans useful to one another because survival required it. And maybe the next challenge is learning how to make humans feel valuable to one another when survival doesn't.

That is not primarily an artificial-intelligence problem. It is a human one. And the technology we need may be much older than computers: language, trust, ritual, community, forgiveness, belonging, love. We may need to become engineers of those things with the same seriousness we once brought to steam engines, corporations, and neural networks. Which brings me back to the question I asked in that room: What would you do if you found the best words? I don't know if these are them. I don't know whether such words exist. I no longer think any one book, religion, company, technology, or person gets to own the answer. But I have spent the better part of a year following the question, and after making it far more complicated than it needed to be, I keep arriving somewhere embarrassingly simple.

There are people in your life who do not know what you see when you look at them. There are people you love who mostly encounter that love as an assumption. There are people wondering whether their usefulness is the reason they have a place. There are people who would behave differently tomorrow if someone they respected told them:

> *"I see you. You matter to me. I think you're capable of more than this moment suggests. I believe in you."*

Maybe changing humanity doesn't begin by persuading humanity. Maybe it begins by choosing five people - and going first.

Before we go any farther, I want you to do something small. Do not message anyone yet. Do not turn this into a project. Just let five names appear in your mind: five people whose judgment matters to you, or whose future you would sincerely like to see go well. They do not have to know one another. They do not have to be the five people you love most. The exercise is only a marker. I want those names sitting quietly in the background while we talk about belonging, fear, usefulness, God, AI, work, truth, and what human beings might be for next.

By the end of the book, I will ask you to do something with those names. For now, notice how quickly your mind produced them—and notice what you hope those people believe about you.

CHAPTER 2

The Answer I Had No Reason to Trust

There are facts in this story that could make some readers trust me less. I would rather tell you that early. The first version of the idea did not arrive through peer review, a business case, or a sober afternoon with a whiteboard. It arrived during a period of my life when my judgment, relationships, identity, and sense of home were all under unusual strain. One of the catalytic moments involved psilocybin. Another involved waking up in a psychiatric ward and discovering that much of the life I had understood as home no longer felt available to me. I am not including those facts because unusual experiences validate unusual conclusions. They do not. I am including them because origins matter, and because one of the disciplines of this book is refusing to make the messenger's status do the work of the argument.

An altered state can produce insight, nonsense, or both. A psychiatric crisis can contain truths, distortions, fear, care, misinterpretation, and real consequences at the same time. A person can be frightened and frightening. A family can act from love and still cause pain. An institution can be necessary without possessing a complete interpretation of the person inside it. I do not need you to settle any of that before continuing. What matters is that the events turned questions about belonging from an intellectual interest into something that felt close to survival. When the social world that calibrated my reality changed suddenly, I became obsessed with what happens to human beings when they believe their place with other people is uncertain.

The experience did not prove the theory. It gave me the question.

The Answer I Had No Reason To Trust

On December 29, I ate 0.99 grams of fresh Golden Teacher mushroom. I am telling you this near the beginning because hiding it until the end would be a cheap trick. The first version of this idea did not arrive from a spreadsheet. It arrived while I was under the influence of psilocybin. My life was difficult. Relationships, business and family were consuming enormous amounts of attention. I was drinking more. Using THC more. Scrolling more. I felt nauseated and sat staring at my laptop. Then a thought arrived with embarrassing simplicity: close the laptop. The answer is in the real world.

I did. The room remained the same room, but my experience of it changed. Everything felt warm, connected and safe. I thought about my dog, my parents, my children, pride, care and belonging. The word that appeared was love. Then my brain did what it always does. It tried to turn a feeling into a model. Love plus one. Fear minus one. Two liquids in a cup. Pour in love and fear gets displaced. But I could not simply order my own cup to fill. In the picture in my head, I had to pour into other people and trust that love could move through the system. It was ridiculous. It was also one of the clearest experiences of my life.

An hour later the acute effects faded. The question did not. Was it psilocybin? Obviously. Was it also memory, exhaustion, expectation and everything else happening in my life? Almost certainly. Was it God? I have no instrument that can answer that. More important, I had just been handed an answer I had absolutely no reason to trust. The experience proved nothing. It gave me a question. Altered states can generate vivid connections; vivid is not the same thing as true. If the question was useful, it should survive contact with everything humans had already learned. If it was bullshit, I wanted to find the wall. So I started looking for places it should break.

The Discipline of Not Trusting Myself

The tempting way to tell a story like this is to make the unusual experience the source of authority. I felt something with enormous force; therefore it was true. That is precisely the move I do not want to make. Intensity is evidence that an experience was intense. It is not evidence that the interpretation attached to it deserves to govern anyone else.

That distinction became unusually important to me because the months that followed contained a lot of competing explanations. I had people who loved me telling me that some of my conclusions were dangerous. I had moments when I felt more certain than the available evidence justified. I also had experiences that produced questions I still think were valuable after the certainty wore off. If I flatten all of that into either revelation or pathology, I lose the part that matters most: the work of figuring out what, if anything, survives.

So I began giving myself a rule. Separate what happened from what I felt, and separate both from what I now think it may mean. The first category should be as factual as I can make it. The second belongs to me; nobody can tell me I did not experience what I experienced. The third is where humility has to enter, because interpretation is exactly where smart people become attached to stories that flatter, protect, or frighten them.

This book uses that rule repeatedly. I can say that I experienced an overwhelming sense of connection. I can say I interpreted some later experiences in spiritual language. I can say that losing access to the life I understood as home felt catastrophic. I can also say that none of those facts proves the theory I built afterward. The theory has to stand on its own legs.

There is another reason to be explicit. Some readers will encounter the mushroom story and immediately downgrade everything that follows. Others will romanticize it. Both reactions are shortcuts. If you already believe psychedelics are nonsense, you may be tempted to dismiss a question because of the circumstances in which I asked it. If you already believe altered states reveal hidden truths, you may be tempted to trust the question too quickly. I am asking for neither response.

The more useful posture is almost boring: here is an event; here is the thought it produced; now let us see whether the thought survives daylight.

That became the pattern of the year. A dramatic experience would generate an oversized idea. Then reality would make me shrink it. I would start with love and fear as if they were two liquids in a cup. Then I would notice that fear can be useful and love can be controlling. I would start with a formula and discover that the formula was better treated as a hypothesis. I would start with the claim that people were irrational and discover that many apparently irrational actions made more sense when I asked what relationship, identity, or place the person believed they were protecting.

I came to trust the shrinking. The smaller claims were usually more durable. They also became more useful. "Love solves everything" is inspirational and nearly useless. "Make it safer for someone to tell you an uncomfortable truth" is much less grand and much easier to test.

The experience gave me permission to ask a huge question. The months that followed taught me to prefer answers small enough to survive being wrong.

CHAPTER 3

The Door Closed From the Other Side

January 5 is difficult for me to write about without turning the page into a courtroom. There are versions of the story other people would tell differently. There are decisions I still wish had been handled differently. There are also decisions of my own that I would now describe with more humility than I did while they were happening. I do not want this book to prosecute anyone, including me.

What I can say is simpler. I entered that week with a life I understood as home and emerged from it experiencing much of that life as unavailable. I woke up in a psychiatric ward. People I loved were frightened. I was frightened too, though not always by the same things. The arguments about what was happening quickly became arguments about who was allowed to interpret reality.

If you are reading this hoping I will prove that I was right and everyone else was wrong, I am going to disappoint you. I do not think that is the most useful question anymore. A person can be misread and still be wrong about some things. A family can act from love and still cause harm. A psychiatric intervention can contain legitimate concern and still be experienced as violation. Several descriptions can be partly true at the same time without becoming morally equivalent.

What matters for this book is what happened to the membership question. Overnight, the questions stopped being abstract. What happens to a human being when the people who normally help calibrate reality become part of the thing the person no longer knows how to interpret? What happens when disagreement is not merely disagreement but potentially evidence about whether you will still have a home, a family, a role, a company, or a future you recognize?

Those questions are not arguments against psychiatric care. They are questions about social rupture. They apply to divorce, bereavement, firing, excommunication, migration, family cutoff, public disgrace, and every other event in which a human being suddenly discovers that an expected future has been removed.

Involuntary exile is not brave at first. It is disorienting. Voluntary leaving contains a sentence: I am going. Involuntary exile begins with a different one: You cannot stay. That difference changes everything. The person who chooses departure can organize fear around a decision. They can prepare, imagine the alternative, gather resources, and tell themselves a coherent story about why the pain is necessary. The person who is left often receives pain before meaning. Divorce papers. A termination meeting. A family cutoff. An excommunication. A diagnosis that ends a career. A death. A hospital discharge into a life that no longer resembles the one that existed before admission.

The mind scrambles to restore causality. What happened? What did I do? Who decided? Can I reverse it? Was any of it real? Those questions are not philosophical. They are attempts to rebuild a map. We underestimate how much identity is outsourced to repetition. The same bed. The same person in the kitchen. The same commute. The same children in the next room. The same church on Sunday. The same Slack channels. The same number calling at lunch. Home is partly architecture and partly prediction. You know what is likely to happen next. Involuntary exile shatters prediction. That can make the person look irrational precisely when they are trying desperately to become oriented.

They may call too much. Explain too much. Attach too quickly. Make huge plans. Reach for any person or substance or idea that reduces the terror of not knowing where they belong. The first kindness is to stop demanding that they immediately turn the rupture into a growth story. It may become growth. Today it is loss. The second kindness is to separate two questions: Can the old home be restored? And if it cannot, can a new life be built? The first answer may be no. The second does not have to be.

There is a shame specific to involuntary exile. If I was removed, maybe the group saw something I did not. If my spouse left, maybe I was unlovable. If my family cut me off, maybe family itself voted. If the institution hospitalized me, fired me, disciplined me, or rejected me, maybe the authority of the event proves the authority of the interpretation. Sometimes the institution was right about something.

That still does not make the event a total verdict. A person can need psychiatric care and still be more than a diagnosis. An employee can be wrong for a role and still be competent elsewhere. A marriage can fail without proving either person is incapable of love. A family can set a boundary without possessing omniscience about the person outside it. This separation between event and identity is essential because shame tries to compress everything. I lost this place becomes I am a person places reject. That sentence is too large for the evidence. Exile tells you that one membership changed. Do not let the nervous system quietly promote it to a law of nature. The instinct after involuntary exile is often to prosecute the entire past.

Were they ever real? Did they ever love me? Was every memory fake? This is understandable because continuity has been broken. The mind looks backward for signs that the ending was always inevitable. Sometimes those signs were there. Sometimes the ending changes the meaning of the past more than the past itself warrants. A relationship can have been loving and still become unable to continue. A family can have failed catastrophically without every earlier act of care becoming fraudulent. An institution can have helped you before it harmed you. Holding both truths is emotionally expensive because villain stories are simpler. But complexity protects memory from becoming another casualty. You do not have to destroy every good thing that happened in order to justify taking seriously what happened later. And you do not have to preserve the good memories as evidence that you should return. Past value and

present safety are different questions. There is another trap after involuntary exclusion: converting every later rejection into repetition of the first.

A friend takes hours to reply. The nervous system hears abandonment. A partner asks for space. The nervous system hears exile. A boss gives criticism. The nervous system hears expulsion. This is understandable because the mind learns from catastrophic examples. Once a door slammed without warning, every moving hinge becomes interesting. The danger is that hypervigilance can create the next rupture. You ask for reassurance more often. Interpret ambiguity more negatively. Test loyalty. Demand faster evidence. The other person feels managed. They withdraw. Now the old prediction appears confirmed. This is the fear-leak loop at the level of exile. The way out is not to shame the fear.

It is to slow the interpretation. What actually happened? What else could it mean? What information would distinguish distance from ordinary autonomy? Can I ask without accusing? The goal is not to become impossible to abandon. No human relationship can offer that guarantee. The goal is to stop living every new relationship as if the old ending has already begun.

The Morning After Exile

The worst part may be how ordinary the world looks when yours has ended. Morning is insulting after catastrophe. Traffic continues. People order coffee. Somebody complains about weather. Your phone still knows the old addresses. The grocery store still stocks the cereal you bought for people who may no longer be at your table. The ordinary world creates a strange mismatch: externally, nothing happened; internally, the map burned. This is why grief after social rupture can feel physically unreal. The future had been preloaded with people. Birthdays. Trips. School pickups. Sunday dinners. Inside jokes. Retirement plans. The mind did not store those as fantasies. It stored them as probable futures.

Then probability collapses. You are not merely grieving past events. You are grieving thousands of expected events that will now never happen. This helps explain why "move on" is such useless advice. Move where? The old future is gone and the new one has not acquired detail. The task in this stage is smaller than reinvention. Eat. Sleep. Make one reliable plan for tomorrow. Tell one person where you are. Do the administrative work the crisis requires. Do not interpret the absence of joy as evidence that the future is empty. A nervous system deprived of prediction needs repetition before inspiration. Home is rebuilt partly through boring things.

The same café three mornings. The same walk. The same person answering. A drawer where your things stay. A key. A meal you know how to make. People often search for a dramatic new identity when what they first need is a sequence. Tomorrow needs to become predictable enough that the future stops feeling like a threat. There is also practical grief in objects. A coffee mug. A route home. A child's drawing. A key that no longer opens anything. A song that belonged to the relationship before it belonged to the artist. Humans store belonging in objects because objects are stable cues. When the relationship

ends, the cue remains and keeps delivering an outdated prediction. For a while, the world is full of tiny false alarms. That is why people throw things away, box them up, move furniture, repaint rooms, or leave cities.

These acts can look superficial. They are ways of updating the environment. You are telling the nervous system: The map changed. The goal is not to erase memory. It is to stop every object from pretending the old future is still scheduled. There is a social practical problem too: everybody wants an explanation before you have one. Friends ask what happened. Family members ask whose side they should take. Coworkers speculate. People who care about you want enough information to know how to help. You may be tempted to narrate the event with certainty because uncertainty feels weak. Resist that pressure. Early stories harden. The first explanation becomes the version repeated to everyone, and repetition turns it into identity. Then later evidence has to fight not only the memory but the public story you already told.

A simple sentence can protect you: "I know what happened to me. I am still working out what it means." That sentence preserves dignity and epistemic room. You are not required to produce a finished philosophy while still bleeding.

The reason I am willing to put this part of my life on the page is not that I think vulnerability wins an argument. It is that the book would be dishonest without showing you where the urgency came from. Belonging became interesting to me because I experienced its loss as something much closer to a survival problem than a lifestyle preference.

That does not make my interpretation universal. It gives me a stake in the question. And perhaps it gives you permission to test the question against your own life instead of accepting mine.