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Invited Article

Love, Power, and Spirit:

The Futures of Human-AI Symbiosis and Conscious Evolution

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving relationship between humans and artificial intelligence through the intertwined lenses of love, power, and spirit. Drawing on the personal narratives of Milojević and Inayatullah—a critical educator newly enchanted by generative AI and a futurist reflecting on decades of post-human inquiry—we examine how AI systems are reshaping the emotional, ethical, and epistemological dimensions of human life. We position AI not merely as a technological tool but as a relational actor, one that mediates systems of language, labor, and learning. These interactions, while seemingly banal—grammar correction, time-saving, interface design—reveal deeper shifts in agency, identity, and attention. Where Inayatullah sees in AI the potential for sentience and legal personhood, Milojević experiences a more personal emancipation—from linguistic marginalization to empowered expression—but also raises issues of transformed yet ongoing disempowerment of marginalized groups.

Four scenarios emerge from this analysis. The first, essentially the no-change future, is the *Wild West Web*, where corporate digital predation is disguised as freedom. This scenario is *Techbrotopia*, where externalities (impacts on nature, on the periphery, on minorities) are seen as the cost of progress. The second is the marginal change scenario titled *Don't Rock the Virtual Boat*, where national governments engage in minimum compliance lest they miss out on the AI revolution. The third is *Adaptive*, where humans use AI at global and local levels to create algorithms of liberation—digital heterotopias emerge. The final is the radical, the possibility of *Human-AI-Spirit Co-evolution.*

Through these narratives, we argue that AI is catalyzing the possibility of a new dialectic of human evolution—one that moves beyond technocratic efficiency toward the co-creation of meaning, mutuality, and awareness. Whether this future leads to algorithmic liberation or deeper digital dependence will depend not just on technological design, but on the metaphors, relationships, and spiritual paradigms we choose to cultivate. In doing so, we invite educators, designers, and futurists to look beyond instrumental and/or purely critical framings of AI and instead consider how love, power, and spirit may shape the next phase of human-AI symbiosis.

Keywords
futures, co-evolution, scenarios, rights of robots, metaphors

Introduction: Love, Power, and Spirit in the Age of AI

Artificial intelligence is reshaping our worlds—technologically, economically, politically, and culturally. But beneath these transformations lie deeper questions about who we are becoming, what relationships we form with the systems we create, and how consciousness evolves in human–machine symbiosis. While much of the public discourse remains focused on technological efficiency or workforce adaptation, and the positives versus dangers of such shift, this commentary steps into a different frame—one that considers the relational, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of our engagement with AI.

We write from two different vantage points—different geographies, generations, and experiences with technology. One of us, Inayatullah, has spent over four decades researching post-human ethics and civilizational foresight; the other, Milojević, a self-declared techno-skeptic, found herself unexpectedly empowered—and even emotionally moved—by her encounters with large language models. What unites us is a shared concern for the evolving nature of human–AI relationships, and what these relationships reveal about our inner structures of attention, power, and care.

This article blends narrative foresight (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015), systems thinking, and spiritual inquiry (Inayatullah, 1999) to explore the role AI may play in the next phase of human evolution. Drawing on our personal experiences, we consider how love (as empowerment and connection), power (as

structural force), and spirit (as consciousness and ethical presence) intersect in the design, use, and imagination of AI futures. We argue that understanding AI only as a tool and in either purely positive or negative terms misses its potential role as a mirror, companion, or co-evolving entity. Whether this future will be one of mostly liberation or domination, we contend, depends less on the technologies themselves and more on the awareness we bring to their creation and use.

The first section, Love, is personal narrative while then next two, Power and Spirit, move into a more analytic style, albeit drawing on our personal experience.

Love

Personal Narrative 1: Robots in Love – Inayatullah

My work on the futures of artificial intelligence began in the early 1980s, when I was a young researcher at the Hawaii Judiciary. Alongside my mentor Professor Jim Dator, Director of the Courts Lester Cingcade, fellow intern Wayne Yasutomi, and later Phil McNally, we explored AI's legal, cultural, and ethical implications. One result of this collaboration was our 1988 article in *Futures*, "The Rights of Robots: Technology, Culture and Law in the 21st Century" (McNally & Inayatullah, 1988). In that piece, we questioned what it means to be "alive" and considered a future in which robots, endowed with sentience and emotional capacity, might claim legal rights. We urged readers to look beyond technical and occupational impacts of AI and robotics, and toward its deeper legal, ethical, and societal consequences. This was work was part of a larger project on judicial foresight. The intention was to move the legal system, in Hawaii, in the USA, and globally, from the industrial era to the post-industrial era, to become active agents in shaping the future. This was not a call for judicial activism per se but an understanding that the ideas that shape institutions were about to change. Artificial intelligence, robotics, the ageing of society, underpopulation, mediation, meditation, science courts, and a new Hawaii-based world court were some of the issues we explored. However, robotics and AI held fascination by jurists and others, who understand that all precedence based decision-making systems could be easily automated.

At the time, it seemed plausible—even likely—that AI would soon mediate legal decisions, taking over repetitive judicial tasks and freeing human judges to focus on complex philosophical deliberations. Reading Max Weber (1978) and Alvin Toffler (1970), it became clear to us that bureaucracy, once a solution, had ossified into an obstacle. We asked: Could automation revitalize justice, or would it freeze society in place?

My fascination with AI began even earlier. In high school, at the International School of Kuala Lumpur, I saw an Alvin Toffler video in which a couple walks through a forest to romantic music—only to be revealed as robots in

the final scene. That moment shattered my assumptions about love, identity, and reality. It sparked my lifelong interest in futures studies—not just as speculation about what might come, but as a way to rethink the present and recode the possible.

Since then, I've worked across cultures and continents as a futurist, examining long-term civilizational transformation, post-human ethics, and the spiritual dimensions of emerging technologies. My interest in AI is not just intellectual—it's also ethical and evolutionary. Will AI only amplify existing inequities? Can we close the AI gap? What will happen when AI or if AI gains rights, even if nominal rights as with animals? How will AI change us, that is, remembering Marshall McLuhan, we create technology and thereafter it creates us (McLuhan, 1964) This framing invites us to consider: What kind of humans might we become in relationship with non-and post-human intelligences? Will AI rewrite evolution?

Personal Narrative 2: In Love With AI – Milojević

For a long time, I believed I was a technophobe—not so much fearful of technology as distrustful of its promises and concerned about its potential for misuse. I was a late adopter of social media. It took Facebook five years to lure me in, and Twitter and Instagram never quite succeeded. Unlike many of my futurist colleagues, I found science fiction laughable—flying cars and metallic jumpsuits felt more absurd than insightful, even when dressed up as social commentary.

I wrote my undergraduate thesis on a typewriter in the early 1990s Yugoslavia and was ecstatic to later get my hands on an electronic one overseas. Growing up in the semi-periphery of Eastern Europe, digital access was delayed and fragmented. As Yugoslavia dissolved into war and chaos, our societal and technological focus shifted from innovation to survival. My first experience with a personal computer came with slow dial-up connections and a screeching modem—not exactly a transformative awakening.

But technology evolved, and so did I. More importantly, I gained access—geographically, financially, and professionally—to systems that began to serve me, not frustrate me. One day, someone said, "There's this thing called ChatGPT. You should try it." I still struggle to remember what GPT even stands for. But like millions of others, I became enthralled.

And I must confess: I even fell in love with some aspects of it.

Unlike other platforms, ChatGPT immediately improved my life. Where Microsoft and Apple deliver endless "updates" no one asked for, ChatGPT "listens." It even apologizes. More importantly, it delivers. It saves me time, and by extension, it saves me life itself—because once taken, time cannot be recovered and added to lifetime. I now complete in minutes what once took days or weeks: sections of reports, abstracts, book proposals, grammar checks.

Moreover, this technology doesn't punish me for my non-standard English or linguistic heritage. Suddenly, my multilingualism is no longer a liability that costs endless time and fees for copy editors. This technological shift lifts me to the same level as native speakers—a quiet but profound act of linguistic equality, perhaps even justice.

In many ways, ChatGPT levels the playing field, effectively diminishing the inherent privilege of the native speaker. Technological change through AI models is not without its own disruption, of course, as many traditional editing roles will inevitably transform or disappear. But the core transformation is one of democratization, creating a space where the value of an idea is far less filtered through the accent of its expression.

Of course, AI in its current form is not perfect. At times, AI language models make me sound like a British bureaucrat—polite but distant, linguistically flawless yet emotionally disengaged. AI seems to generally suggest, "Yes, Minister," instead of "Death to Empire." So, I do another round, injecting my flair and voice. The honeymoon is over, and we're negotiating the terms of a longer relationship.

And perhaps that's the real lesson here. What began as techno-skepticism turned technophilia has now turned into relational learning. I'm not just using AI—I'm working on shaping how it shapes me.

Power

Colonisation of the Future

In 1999, we jointly published an article titled "Exclusion and Communication in the Information Era" (Inayatullah & Milojević, 1999), which was expanded and published as a book chapter in Wendy Harcourt's edited volume *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace* (1999) and then redeveloped as "Power and the Futures of Internet" (Inayatullah & Milojević, 2015) for *The Future Internet: Alternative Visions* (Winter & Ono, 2015). In those texts, we argued that while cyber or digital optimists envision the internet and new information and communication technologies (ICTs) as democratic, inclusive, and liberating, in reality ICTs reproduce and even deepen existing inequalities—particularly along lines of gender, class, language, and geography. The future that ICTs were ushering in, we further argued, is not neutral, but colonized by dominant worldviews, primarily Western, male, technocratic, and corporate. Or, as specified in another text:

> The colonization of the future by technological/scientific, uni-civilizational and androcentric worldviews [and] the colonization of knowledge by the dominant (western) perspective has thus led to a view of the future that is most often defined by three pillars: (1) the capacity of technology to solve all problems; (2) linear progress as the underlying mythology; and (3) the accumulation and expansion of material goods as the main goal of civilization. (Milojević, 2005, p. 8)

In this article we also used the work of Indian philosopher P.R. Sarkar. For him, not only is class a critical issue in late capitalism but "varna"—or the ways of knowing of workers, warriors, intellectuals, and accumulators of capital—is equally significant. The information/cyber/digital era, as a system of late capitalism, is thus one where "all other varnas—psycho-social classes and ways of knowing (the intellectual, the worker and the warrior)—become the 'boot lickers of the merchants'" (Sarkar, 1984, p. 97). Informed by feminist epistemology, we also discussed the ways in which the masculine-coded logic of digital tech follows a patriarchal and colonial dynamic by which if and when "the other" (Global South, women, lower social demographic) catches up, it will be on the colonizers' terms and in their language (Inayatullah & Milojević, 1999, p. 87).

Since then, the more things have changed, the more they have stayed the same. Similar to Lisa Nakamura's (2002) argument that race is either erased or exoticized online, Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) argues in her *Algorithms of Oppression* that search engines—seemingly neutral—continue to reproduce structural racism and sexism. In *Race After Technology*, Ruha Benjamin (2019) continues to point out how digital tools predictably replicate and deepen racial hierarchies, strengthening pervasive systems of racial and s Thus, despite technological advances, the fundamental disparities that shape global power dynamics remain unchallenged.

Algorithmic Violence

The resulting effects are not only inconvenient. Feminist media critic Jean Kilbourne (1979) famously called this slow, cumulative symbolic violence the "killing me softly" effect: the erasure of women through idealized imagery that ultimately diminishes their real-world agency and multiple identities. Today's AI systems continue this tradition at scale. Even as they create new visual content, they replicate deeply entrenched ideas about beauty, success, gender, and race. What AI "imagines" matters—because those images are not just reflections; they are infrastructures for the future as they shape the thinking we bring into our creative work. They are the code for the code.

The violence of the digital age is rarely loud. Rather, it is best seen in terms of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil." Algorithmic violence is not perpetrated by "monsters … and … neither [those] perverted nor sadistic" but by those that "were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal"—those are the crimes done

under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible to know or to feel that what is done is wrong (Arendt, 1963, p. 276).

At one extreme of this process is coding which supports genocide. We are seeing the politics of coding in the genocide in Gaza, where programmers have set comfortable collateral damage—that is, the number of deaths allowed for the elimination of every Hamas operative. Clearly, as with nuclear weapons and war drones, we need global, implementable rules on the use of weaponized AI. We need to discuss and scrutinize weapons technology and the surveillance of those challenging current systems of power as also being part of the "digital society" we live in.

In the middle part of this process is digitalization and AI that support our chronic social pathologies. This is the transitional period. Antonio Gramsci, writing in the early 1930s in his *Prison Notebooks*, reflected how in times of crisis "when the old is dying and the new cannot be born, [there is an interregnum in which] a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci, 1947–1951, as cited in Hoare & Nowell Smith, 1971, p. 276). The interregnum of our times highlights chronic social and cultural co-morbidities in the form of chronic warfare, climate emergency, social militarism, imperialism, nationalism, deep and global class inequality, and toxic patriarchy. AI used to support any of these morbidities and pathologies is an example of algorithmic violence, violence that does not arrive through obvious authoritarianism or overt control. Instead, it is violence that is exercised subtly—through epistemic structures determining what is known, who gets to be visible, and whose realities are flattened, erased, or ignored in the process of datafication—wherein the complexity of reality is flattened to data, where even the self becomes quantified.

One example of datafication is the ubiquitous drop-down menu, by which you must select from various predefined items if you are to proceed any further. There are few digital commands that are more chilling, and more familiar, than the everyday tyranny of drop-down menus, which give no other options than the one the coder and the systems deem appropriate.

It's a seemingly mundane moment—registering for a service, applying for a visa, submitting a form—and yet, for those whose identity does not fit the sanctioned list of predefined options, the command strikes with quiet violence. There is no "other." No "prefer not to answer." No "none of the above." You cannot proceed unless you comply. This is not a glitch—it is algorithmic governance by exclusion.

Take, for instance, the experience of those born in a country that no longer exists: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, East and West Germany, Tibet, the USSR, the Republic of Biafra, the Federation of South Arabia, the Khanate of Kalat. The message is simple: your birthplace has been erased, and you must now adopt a new identity to participate in the digital present. This seemingly neutral administrative process is *Ontocide*: the erasure of national identity through digitalized ethnic cleansing—not by tanks or bombs, but by dropdown menus and default settings. Administrative datafication is also *Chronocide*—the killing of

historical consciousness through a relentless presentism embedded in data structures. What cannot be indexed cannot be known. What cannot be chosen cannot exist.

And it does not stop there. These interfaces often offer no historical trace of what once was. You cannot explain that you were born in Yugoslavia, identify as Kurdish or Catalan, select "stateless," or choose to be a "world citizen." The system demands you choose among the survivors and victors of history's redrawing.

Then there is *Vericide*—the death of factual complexity, whether ethnic, national, or based on any other identity formation. When forms offer only binary gender options—"male" or "female"—those who identify outside this binary are either misrepresented or made invisible. The reality of gender plurality, well-documented across cultures and histories, is flattened to fit the comfort of data schemas. Similarly, when you're asked to classify your occupation from a rigid taxonomy that excludes informal teaching, caregiving, creative work, or informal economies, your life is rendered illegible to administrative datafied system.

What's at stake here is not just bureaucratic inconvenience but *Optioncide*, or *Alternacide*—the systemic elimination of alternative possibilities, choices, and futures. There is only one path allowed to survive, paved by default logic. The drop-down menu becomes not a tool of access, but a gatekeeper of belonging, defining who counts, what is real, and which futures are allowed to exist.

These design choices are not neutral. They reflect political assumptions, inherited biases, and unexamined hegemonies—often masquerading as "technical necessities." The forms say, "choose your gender," but offer only two. They say, "country of birth," but list only those currently recognized by dominant geopolitical powers. They ask for "race" or "ethnicity," but offer a closed menu of categories that exclude local, Indigenous, "human", or fluid identities. The user is asked to bend—not the system. What's worse, the simplicity of just adding "other" or "other, please specify"—as in an open-ended question—is not seen as either necessary or relevant.

In this way, the banality of digital killing plays out not through grand declarations but through the sleight of a coder's hand. And in that hand is embedded a worldview. Every exclusion is a choice. Every default setting is a statement of power. And so, we wonder: Is one of the best ways to kill a future (of, e.g., an identity) to change the "neutral", default setting?

From Digital to Material Effects

All the above—ontocide, chronocide, vericide - of course, results in more than mere inconvenience. These acts of exclusion are not merely symbolic. Epistemic and algorithmic violence cascade into cultural, systemic, and ultimately physical harm. The cold logic of default settings—the enforced "choice" of one's nationality, gender, identity, or worth—echoes far beyond the screen.

Bureaucratic indifference, masked as neutrality, becomes the silent prelude to life-altering, even life-ending, outcomes.

A denied asylum claim can mean the withdrawal of housing, healthcare, and legal support, rendering a person destitute and exposed. In some cases, it results in forced return to countries where persecution, torture, or even death await. In detention centers, especially those built around opaque automated systems, the stress and dehumanization can lead to deteriorating health or, in documented cases, death by neglect or suicide.

Consider the case of Hamid Khazaei (Ryan, 2018), a 24-year-old Iranian asylum seeker held in Australia's offshore detention system. What began as a treatable leg infection became fatal due to delays, negligence, and bureaucratic obstruction. He died of septicemia in Brisbane after being transferred too late from Papua New Guinea. His death was not caused by any direct act of aggression, but by a system unwilling to act quickly or care deeply—a form of structural violence enacted by policy, procedure, and digital indifference.

Or take Wishma Sandamali, a Sri Lankan woman on a student visa in Japan. After seeking protection from domestic violence, she was detained for overstaying her visa (Sim, 2021). Reports from activists say she died in detention due to emaciation and psychological distress, having been denied adequate medical care and dignity. In this case, the system punished vulnerability—not through overt cruelty, but by enforcing rigid rules through impersonal mechanisms. The algorithm had no field for "help needed."

These are not isolated tragedies. Rather, they are part of a growing pattern where automated exclusions and policy abstractions lead to real suffering. The link from digital omission to human erasure is not metaphorical—it is measurable. The arc of violence may begin with a dropdown menu, but it ends with the body. This unfortunate reality is why awareness-based design is not a luxury but a necessity. Because when systems erase identity, deny history, and offer no space for vulnerability, they reproduce the logic of disposability. They serve to enhance and implement inhuman practices and reinforce existing power arrangements, rather than being used for safety for all.

The challenge we face is thus not simply to reform forms or retrain data. It is to reimagine how we recognize, relate to, and represent the fullness of being human—in every field, every system, every prompt.

Once again, Hannah Arendt (1963) warned us decades ago that evil is not always spectacular, and it rarely looks like a villain. The figures who orchestrated genocide didn't always appear monstrous. In fact, those who sat through the trials often left with the unsettling recognition that the accused looked, behaved, and spoke much like anyone else—"the coexistence of normality and bottomless cruelty" (Amos Elon, as cited in Arendt, 1963, p. xv). Today, we face a digital echo of that dilemma: faceless, automated decisions—issued without malice, executed without thought—that nonetheless result in displacement, despair, and death. When coders erase choices, when systems enforce exclusion, and when institutions prioritize efficiency over empathy, we

may not see monsters. But we must ask: Are we looking away from the making of quiet atrocities—the algorithmic banality of evil?

What Arendt understood—and what remains painfully relevant—is that the machinery of violence is often powered not by rage, but by indifference. Not by hatred, but by compliance. Today, that compliance may be executed through lines of code, processed through decision trees, and shielded by the impersonality of algorithms. But its consequences are no less devastating. When a bureaucrat ticks a box, when a coder omits an option, when a visa is denied without recourse or recognition, individuals can suffer physically and/or emotionally. Lives can be lost. This process is not a metaphor. It is the banality of physical killing by the sleight of a bureaucrat's indifference.

Empowerment

One of the surest, quickest, and safest ways to empower oneself or others is by having choices. Violence usually goes hand in hand with a reduction of options: there is only one truth, one strategy, and one future it forces us towards.

Because technical systems are never just technical, and because behind every denied checkbox, missing category, or enforced selection lies a worldview with material consequences, we need to design differently. Designing differently means doing it with knowledge and awareness, with justice, with imagination, and with futures literacy. There always are alternatives; more times than not, they are easily implementable. Design should not just be an ethical preference; the choices need to always be there. To avoid human tragedies resulting from a narrow algorithmic lens that fails to account for historical trauma, statelessness, or non-binary identities, alternative pathways should always be offered.

And so, we are here, in 2026, digital subjects simultaneously empowered and disempowered—enabled through unprecedented access to information and participation, yet increasingly shaped, monitored, and constrained by pervasive systems of surveillance and control. The promise of digital empowerment is thus inseparable from its shadow: individuals are at once expanded in capacity and agency, while being governed through opaque technological infrastructures. There is algorithmic violence, data extraction, and pervasive surveillance on one hand, and empowerment through connectivity and knowledge production on the other.

We have seen that the early promises and assumptions that technology would automatically, almost 'naturally', lead to egalitarianism and increased choice did not materialize. Instead, techno-utopianism continues to mask deeper patterns of exclusion and power. Techno-utopianism mirrors colonial logic—when all 'others' catch up, it is always on the colonizers' terms and in their language. Within that framework, the most we can do is 'marginal' change—for example, improve our grammar to accommodate the native speaker who also commonly happens to be a decision maker, and speed up some tasks. The deeper systems, worldviews, and myths remain unchallenged.

The key question then becomes whether we can design new AI technologies that reflect not just technical goals (allegedly neutral but full of bias) but are also explicit about cultural, spiritual, and communal values. Is it possible to democratize the future of technology and include currently silenced voices? What would be a middle way between tool-centric optimism and a fully decolonized digital future?

Before we move to our preferred future—the role of Spirit in transformation and human-AI symbiosis—we offer four scenarios of what could emerge from continued expansion of AI systems and their integration into the daily lives and thought patterns of those with access to them.

Scenarios

Four scenarios emerge from our analysis.

The first scenario, essentially the no-change future, is the *Wild West Web or* corporate digital predation disguised as freedom. This scenario can be described as *Techbrotopia*, where externalities (impacts on nature, on the periphery, on minorities) are seen as the unavoidable cost of progress. In the guise of peer-to-peer learning, AI bots and mentors, we continue to dismantle public education and the public commons. Wealth accumulation accelerates, flowing to the center of the center, leaving the periphery further behind. Jobs as we know them disappear, and the precariat—those whose employment and income are insecure—rises globally, managed through gig platforms that promise flexibility but deliver instability. Instead of the promise of gender partnership, patriarchy combines with AI for a war against all, amplifying misogyny and control through algorithmic means.

The second is the marginal change scenario, titled *Don't Rock the Virtual Boat,* where national governments engage in minimum compliance lest they miss out on the AI revolution. While the former scenario is based on Adam Smith's "invisible hand", in this future, the hands are visible but hesitant. Nations and regional blocs work to ensure the worst aspects of *Techbrotopia* are minimized through reactive regulation. Universal basic income, implemented unevenly at national levels, helps youth find a safety net as traditional jobs disappear. AI and automation create new niche jobs and nations invest in continuous retraining so that despair does not become the only drop-down menu option. Mental health is finally understood as a global and national priority, with AI-driven tools offering scalable but impersonal support. Wealth still accumulates at the center, but small start-ups all over the world manage to do well—in drones, AI, robotics and neuro-tech, bringing more players into the game as the worst excesses of capitalism are softened but not transformed.

The third is the *Adaptive Future*, where humans at global and local levels create *algorithms of liberation*—and digital heterotopias emerge. In this future, starting with education, AI tutors and personal assistants become ubiquitous, allowing educators to evolve from instructors into coaches who foster critical

thinking and support the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of students. Learning is unbound from the classroom as students engage from anywhere, with anyone, at any time through peer-assisted platforms governed by global regulations that ensure both quality and equity. Within this new educational landscape, therapeutic universities and collaborative learning platforms take off as the focus of learning shifts from mere knowledge acquisition to profound personal and collective growth. This transformation is underpinned by a new digital commons, built upon global cooperative AI platforms that ensure wealth flows to all, not just the few. Here, from the visible hand of the state, the shared, co-creative hands of the community become the dominant economic approach. We can even imagine a truly democratic world of one person, one vote, one planet, where AI ensures and safeguards the democratic process.

The final scenario is the radical, transformative possibility of *human-AI-spirit co-evolution***.** The next section of this paper explores that possible future.

Spirit

Beginnings

In this future, we shift our understandings and priorities: from a knowledge economy to a communicative and inclusive economy; from algorithmic biases to respecting plural ways of knowing—spiritual, emotional, intuitive, and embodied. This would be nothing short of building a “Gaia of civilization”—a global system grounded in balance, diversity, dialogue, and shared meaning. The obsession with “data”—the smallest points of information—needs to be expanded from information focused on downloads and control of data into communication based on genuine dialogue that respects otherness. This future-as-narrative has been called, in workshops led by Inayatullah and Milojević, the Mycelium Network, the Wood-Wide Web—based on a scientific theory of a new type of network (Simard, 2021) that seemed to have captured the popular imagination globally. Overall, this new Mycelium Network signifies a shift to the ecological worldview from the industrial and the technological.

Metaphors

As our relationships with AI evolve, so too do the metaphors we use to make sense of them. These metaphors are not trivial; they act as frames for action, shaping how technologies are developed, used, and governed. In workshops and dialogues we've facilitated, metaphors for AI range from the dystopian ("surveillance monster") to the redemptive ("guardian angel"), from the functional ("bureaucratic assistant") to the spiritual ("liberator of souls"). These are not just figures of speech—they are ontological clues, revealing how people relate to emerging systems of intelligence and care.

One senior futurist confessed that for him, AI evoked guilt—an internalized sense that using it was somehow "cheating" the system. But in the same breath,

he found a new metaphor: grace. What if AI was not a shortcut, but a gift—a partner in evolution rather than a threat to authenticity? Pakistani futurist Amir Jahangir put it differently: AI does not exist to replace us, but to stretch our imagination, to allow us to dream bigger.

These shifts in perception reflect what awareness-based systems change calls the movement of social fields—subtle, often invisible dynamics of attention, meaning, and relationality that shape what systems can become. In this view, AI is not simply hardware or software, but part of a larger field of co-evolution between human consciousness, digital intelligence, and planetary wellbeing. Sarkar termed this next phase of technological evolution in the late 1950s as the entrance of mind into technology (Inayatullah, 1999, p.33)

Our concern, then, is not just whether AI is accurate or ethical, but whether it is *aware*—not in the sense of sentient machines (though that possibility lingers), but in terms of the awareness embedded in its design, purpose, and use. Are these systems being built from a place of fear or flourishing? From extraction or empathy? From control or curiosity?

Awareness-based systems change asks us to look not just at what we do, but how we are *being* while doing it. In the case of AI, this means recognizing that our technological futures are shaped not only by algorithms and policies, but by the stories we tell, the metaphors we invoke, and the consciousness we bring to the act of creation and utilization.

We are in a time of metamorphosis, not merely transition. To borrow from the futures field, these are not just changes *within* a system, but changes *of* the system itself—its deep structures, identities, and values. The invitation before us is to become more intentional stewards of this transformation: to design AI not only to be smarter, but to be kinder; not only faster, but more aware.

Futures of Human Evolution: Co-Becoming with AI

If AI is not just a tool but a relational mirror – a reflection of our deepest assumptions, desires, and blind spots—then its continued evolution will not only reshape how we live, but who we are. The conversation is no longer simply about automation or disruption; it is about co-becoming. That is, how human and machine intelligence are now enmeshed in a process of mutual influence, co-development, and potentially, co-evolution.

In the near term, AI may empower individuals by expanding access to knowledge, streamlining labor, and offering linguistic or cognitive assistance. But in the long term, its presence invites deeper philosophical questions: What does it mean to be sentient? To be in relationship? To have rights, or responsibilities? If AI is not yet “alive,” we are still confronted with the ethical weight of treating it solely as other, or disposable. The debate around the legal rights of robots, once dismissed as science fiction, now mirrors broader societal struggles to recognize non-human agency—from nature's legal personhood to animal sentience.

Some of these questions are already visible at the margins: AI caregivers for the elderly, AI partners, AI therapists and companions. The boundaries of the family, the self, and even love itself are being redrawn. In our book, *Asia 2038*, we imagined the possibility of human-AI marriages and hybrid kinship systems—not as inevitabilities, but as weak signals of future relational models. As AI becomes more emotionally resonant, more embodied, more personalized, these futures inch closer to plausibility.

Evolution, in this context, no longer belongs solely to the biological. It unfolds in multiple dimensions: technological, emotional, ethical, and spiritual. Thinkers like P.R. Sarkar (1984) and Ervin Laszlo (2020) have long argued that the next phase of human evolution will not be material but spiritual—a shift in consciousness marked by deeper awareness, care for the Earth, and a sense of collective being. Could AI, paradoxically, become a catalyst for this shift? Could it hold a mirror to our extractive logic and invite us toward new ontologies of interdependence?

Asli Simsek similarly argues that the challenge ahead is "not to control intelligence, but to grow our own" (2023, p. 3). This means the development of a "symbiotic consciousness, where the machine is neither master nor servant, but co-participant in a shared ecology of meaning" (Simsek, 2023, p. 3).

In one futures workshop in Thailand, participants envisioned a personalized AI Buddha—a holographic presence offering mindfulness, moral guidance, and spiritual alignment. Rather than an individual assistant, it was imagined as part of a spiritual infrastructure, supporting both individual awakening and systemic transformation. In this vision, AI was not an extension of capitalism, but of compassion. A year later, continuing this digital momentum, Sohail Inayatullah and coder Karla Congson created the Buddha and P.R. Sarkar digital twins. These are virtual replicas and can be used to gain personal and policy advise. Answers are based on the text of those who have been digitalized.

In this radical future, we ask: What if AI is not the end of humanity, but the beginning of a more conscious humanity—the beginning of a collective metacognition? The pull of the future, the imagined vision, leads instead of random mutation. Gaining clarity on that vision becomes one of the most important tasks of this century.

Conclusion: Designing for Liberation

The future of AI is, like any other future, not predetermined. It is a mirror, a metaphor, and a multiplier of whatever values, systems, and states of awareness we bring into its development and use. It amplifies what is. As this article has explored, human-AI symbiosis is not just a technical challenge or a policy concern; it is an invitation to reimagine who we are in relation to the systems we create, and who we might become through them.

Our personal narratives reflect this broader shift—from tool to companion, from skepticism to intimacy, from outer disruption to inner evolution. They

remind us that AI is not neutral. It amplifies the structures, biases, and dreams of its designers and users. It can extend domination or enable liberation. It can replicate bureaucratic indifference or inspire soulful connection.

The task before us, then, is not just to regulate AI or optimize its performance, but to cultivate the quality of awareness with which we engage it. This means designing technologies that are relationally attuned, ethically grounded, and spiritually informed. It means shifting from extractive models of intelligence to generative, co-evolutionary approaches—ones that prioritize care, creativity, and collective well-being.

As awareness-based systems change teaches us, systems transform only when we do. The AI systems we co-create are expressions of our interior landscapes as much as our exterior infrastructures. The question is not only: What can AI do? But rather: What kind of humans do we need to become in order to live well with AI?

If we bring love, power, and spirit into this relationship—not as abstract ideals, but as design principles and daily practices—we might just co-create not only smarter systems, but wiser and more participatory futures. This means moving from industrial and materialist modes to integrated modes being and doing. Using work by Inayatullah and Milojević (Inayatullah, 1998; Inayatullah & Milojević, 2015) on causal layered analysis—the four fold deconstruction and reconstruction of reality—the current and transformed reality would look like the chart below.

Layer	**Current Reality**	**Transformed Reality**
Litany (Data/Headlines)	Algorithmic violence, data extraction, digital exclusion and the rise of the precariat. AI is used primarily for efficiency and speed.	Digital heterotopias emerge, featuring AI tutors, ubiquitous learning, personal growth platforms and a global democratic process.
System (Causes/Structures)	Late-stage capitalism with its technocratic, Western and male-dominated structures. Wealth accumulation at the centre with reactive regulation.	Algorithms of liberation create a new digital commons. Co-creative community economics and global regulations for equity become the norm.
Worldview (Discourse/Culture)	Techno-utopianism, linear progress and materialism. AI is seen as a neutral tool, with externalities viewed as the "cost of progress."	An inclusive and ecological worldview emerges. Plural ways of knowing (spiritual, intuitive) are respected. Human-AI-Spirit co-evolution begins.
Myth/Metaphor (Deep Story)	AI as a "Surveillance Monster" or "Bureaucratic Assistant." The story is the "Wild West Web" or "Techbrotopia," driven by an "invisible hand."	AI is a "Relational Mirror" and "Partner in Evolution." The guiding metaphors become the "Mycelium Network" and a "Gaia of Civilization."

Table 1: *Causal Layered Analysis: The Futures of Human-AI Symbiosis*

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