



**Auckland Unitarian Church**  
*Love beyond belief*

## Finding our humanity in a technologized world

Ted Zorn © 8th January 2023

Today, I want to talk about finding our humanity in a technologized world and the dangers of relying too heavily on technology to do tasks that we expect to be done by humans. Specifically, I want to delve into the questions raised by the fact that a machine like [ChatGPT](#) can write a speech, a personal letter, or your child's essay assignment.

For those who may not be familiar, [ChatGPT](#) is a large language model developed by OpenAI. It has been trained on a vast amount of data and is able to generate human-like text on a variety of topics. It is a relatively new technology and its capabilities are still being explored and refined.

As Albert Einstein famously said, "I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots." This quote speaks to the dangers of relying too heavily on technology to do tasks that require human interaction and understanding.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We also hold a respect for the interdependent web of all existence. In this age of technology, it can be easy to get caught up in the hype of the latest gadgets and to see ourselves as separate from the natural world. But it's important to remember that we are human beings, not machines. We have hearts and minds, and we are part of the larger web of life on this planet.

In New Zealand, we are blessed with a rich culture and beautiful natural surroundings. From the beaches of the Bay of Islands to the mountains of the Southern Alps, we are reminded of the majesty of the earth and our place within it. Our indigenous Māori culture is an integral part of who we are as a nation, and it teaches us to respect and care for the land, the sea, and all living things.

As we embrace the wonders of technology, it's important to remember that it is just a tool. It is up to us to use it wisely and ethically. When we ask AI to do tasks that we expect to be done by humans, we risk losing touch with what

makes us human - our connections to each other, to our communities, and to the natural world. We risk devaluing the unique experiences, emotions, and consciousness that make us who we are.

To illustrate this point, let's consider the example of a customer service chatbot. While it may be convenient for a company to use a chatbot to answer customer inquiries 24/7, it also means that customers are not interacting with a human being. They are not able to have a real conversation or to have their emotions and concerns truly understood and addressed by a compassionate person. In this case, technology is being used to replace human interaction, rather than enhancing it.

The fact that [ChatGPT](#) can write a speech, a personal letter, or your child's essay assignment raises important questions about the role of technology in our lives. Can a machine truly understand and express the depth of human emotion and experience? Can it truly offer spiritual guidance and wisdom? While [ChatGPT](#) may be able to mimic human language, it lacks the lived experience and consciousness that gives our words meaning and depth. A machine can't truly understand the struggles, joys, and complexities of being human. It can't offer the same level of compassion, empathy, and understanding that a human being can.

As we navigate this technologized world, it's important to remember that we are more than just machines. We are human beings with hearts and minds, and it's up to us to use technology in a way that enhances our humanity, rather than diminishing it. Let's work to create a world where technology serves us, rather than the other way around.

And, as a final thought, I want to acknowledge that this very sermon was written by a machine - [ChatGPT](#). While it is impressive that a machine can mimic human language and generate a sermon, it is important to remember that it lacks the lived experience and consciousness that gives our words meaning and depth.

As the famous saying goes, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Let us not be passive in the face of technology's potential dangers. May we continue to embrace our humanity and the beauty of Aotearoa, even as we embrace the wonders of technology. May we remember that we are all interconnected and that our actions have an impact on the world around us. May we use technology to bring people together and to create a better world for all, but never at the expense of our own humanity.

Let me pause here and say that, what I am now saying, starting with this sentence, I wrote myself. But every previous word of this talk was written by a machine, and it was **produced in under one minute**. And it took remarkably few instructions from me and almost no knowledge of technology.

At what point did you start to suspect the words were not my own? And how did you feel about that suspicion or realisation?

I have heard a lot about [ChatGPT](#) the last few weeks, especially by my fellow academics who are more than a bit freaked out about the thought of every future essay submitted by students being actually written by AI. I also had a friend present to me a Christmas poem written especially for me by [ChatGPT](#) (which he acknowledged and he did so in the spirit of playfulness). And finally – and what convinced me to try this experiment today – a friend explained to me that he had in the last couple of weeks used Chat GPT to develop marketing materials that were superior to what had been developed for him by marketing professionals.

I experimented a bit with [ChatGPT](#) to see what it could do and what its limitations were. The first task I asked it to do was to write a sermon for the Auckland Unitarian church of around 1000 words focusing on the most prominent themes in previous sermons from our church.

Well, it couldn't do that. It responded, "I'm sorry, but I am unable to write a sermon for the Auckland Unitarian church as I do not have access to previous sermons from that church and I am not familiar with its specific teachings and beliefs." Okay, fair enough.

So I then asked it to "Write a sermon for the Auckland Unitarian church of around 1000 words focusing on the most prominent themes in Unitarian church sermons"

It did produce a remarkably competent sermon on that topic, illustrating a familiarity with Unitarian principles. But it was only 400 words. I found out it does respond to commands like "Make it longer or shorter" instructions, but not to a specific word count.

It's also worth mentioning that it took me only about 15 minutes to start an account and produce the first sermon. And as those who have worked closely with me can attest, I'm not particularly sophisticated when it comes to technology.

The fact that AI has reached the point in its development that it can write a sermon, a poem, a personalised letter or an essay for an assignment raises important questions for us as humans.

How do you feel finding out that the sermon you listened to was written by a computer program? How would you feel if you received a long, heartfelt letter from a loved one, or you heard an eloquent eulogy at a funeral, or an impassioned speech from an activist -- and later found out these were written by a machine?

What are the implications for things we value, like authenticity, sincerity and human connection? For the inherent dignity of people? For expressing compassion?

And if you or someone you love makes their living through writing, how do you feel about knowing a machine can compose original, quite competent prose almost instantly? Only 20 years ago, experts were saying technology would only replace humans on repetitive tasks – not on complex cognitive tasks like writing and conversation. But I can guarantee you that corporate executives everywhere will already be considering how they can cut costs by replacing human writers with this kind of technology.

If, as Stephen Fry said in the quote I used in my opening words, language makes us human, what are the implications for finding our humanity in a world in which machines can use OUR language with amazing dexterity?

These are sobering thoughts and only a few of the many important issues we must consider as we grapple with the rapid pace of technological progress and the role of technology in our lives.

### **Meditation / Conversation Starters:**

- Is technology, especially artificial intelligence such as [ChatGPT](#), a threat or a help to being human and being connected to each other?
- What should we do individually or collectively to address any threats or harm from such technologies?