

What if AI stood for Actual Intelligence?

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By Tom Montgomery Fate

I'm a 60-something writer and teacher who sometimes uses Chat GPT and other AI apps. But, in the tradition of Thoreau and Mary Oliver and others, I also still like to walk through the woods with a pencil and journal, observing and taking notes. I view writing as a way to teach myself how to pay attention to the world — even amid a culture of perpetual distraction. So in spite of the AI tech boom over the last decade, I just don't see it as an educational or economic panacea. It has many real benefits, but there is also a downside that comes with replacing face-to-face human experience with a plethora of digital substitutes.

In recent years, attention spans have been shrinking and research shows dramatically **increased anxiety levels** among the young (see **The Anxious Generation**). Some argue that the diminishment in human contact and interaction has also prompted **an epidemic of loneliness**. But the current administration in Washington and the corporate world of Big Tech are not concerned with such matters. Rather they are pumping an **unprecedented amount of money** — hundreds of billions of dollars — into AI development and mega data centers.

I'm not suggesting we cut AI funding — that is not possible — but that its benefits and detriments be considered more carefully. It is not the only solution to the economic and sci-tech challenges that we face. AI, for instance, cannot compensate for the damage done by the massive cuts made to the National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (to name a few). Some of the hundreds of billions of dollars being pumped into AI, would seem better spent restoring the actual intelligence of those research institutions.

No one in Washington seems to know for sure what question Artificial Intelligence actually answers. Is the question: How can we accelerate the **destruction of the environment** (i.e. AI's carbon emissions last year were equivalent to the entirety of New York City) and deplete our **waning water supply** (i.e. AI demand is projected to account for 4.2 — 6.6 billion cubic meters of water withdrawal in 2027). Or is it: How can we ensure “artificial learning” for our students, and that they are taught by avatars and “interactive” screens rather than human beings? (**Alpha Schools**, a private K-8 “teacher-free” school utilizing AI opens this fall in Chicago; tuition is \$55,000.)

And does anyone else see a problem with the actual term? What if AI instead stood for Actual Intelligence? Wouldn't that be better? Growing up, I never wanted an artificial family or artificial friends or an artificial education. And I

never sought artificial food or artificial love or an artificial faith. Rather, I wanted those things to be real.

And, I don't aspire to be an artificial writer, but an authentic one, who relies on his creativity to hopefully say something worthwhile every now and then — maybe even *art-full*.

Which reminds me of the AI translation paradox that prompted me to write this oped: There is art in artificial. I learned this from AI, of course, when a voice-recognition app translated my pronunciation of “artificial” as “art official.”

The word stems from *artificialis*, meaning “of or belonging to art.” But that was in the 14th century, and the meaning has greatly evolved. In the 15th century, “artificial” came to mean “made by man, contrived by human skill and labor” (i.e., not from nature). In the next century, it changed again, to mean “**a substitute for what is natural** or real (artificial light or teeth or flowers).” It later came to mean a fake or counterfeit — an imitation of the real thing.

Perhaps I am old-fashioned or naive, but I would still like to pursue the real thing. I have no interest in fake intelligence or fake news or fake (alternative) facts or fake science or fake truth (i.e. “Truth Social”) — all terms or ideas that have gained legitimacy in the last few years. All scientific and technological research that makes the world — both human and nonhuman — a healthier and more vibrant place to live, and that provides for sustainable growth for all, should be supported. But my fear is that the frenzied investment in

artificial intelligence as “the answer to everything” has been a reactive rather than reflective process, and thus has emerged as a short-term economic opportunity for a few, rather than a long-term investment in the well-being of our planet, and all who live here.

- **Tom Montgomery Fate** is a retired English professor. His most recent book is **The Long Way Home**, a memoir. **He will be speaking** *at the American Writers Festival at The Harold Washington Library on Sunday, June 7.*