

A CONTEMPLATION ON BEING HUMAN

January 2016 was when I was first involved in a conversation on how to stay human. I remember the month and the year because I had gone through a breakdown in life during the time, and that was the first time I sought professional help.

I joined a small group of seven people in a self-healing therapy session. I remember vividly how we all sat in a circle and each of us was sitting on top of a small cushion on the floor. It started with one of the participants posing the question, “how can we stay human when our environments don’t seem to enable us to do so?” I cannot recall exactly how the conversation went, as I was not able to follow. I remember I was busy thinking to myself, what does it mean to *stay human*?

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On the TED talk titled, “Why We All Need to Practice Emotional First Aid,”¹ psychologist, Guy Winch made a valuable point on why we need to take care of our emotions and minds, with the same diligence we take care of our bodies. He mentioned the irony that while we often sustain psychological injuries more than we do physical ones, most of us have no clue how to treat the former. “Oh, you’re feeling depressed? Just shake it off, it’s all in your head!” Guy continued with a lighter vein but not entirely as a joke, “Can you imagine saying that to somebody with a broken leg? Oh, just walk it off, it’s all in your leg!” The audience burst into laughter. I did too. Except that I also cringed. It hit close to home.

I understood that going through a range of emotions is part of life. It was part of being human. However, I also used to see emotion as a sign of weakness. I was convinced that emotions—especially the uncomfortable ones—were not supposed to be shown. Whenever I was about to experience it, my first reaction would be to suppress it and cover it with jokes or laughter. Then I would act tough and distract myself with something else. Often, I distracted myself with work. The more I felt at unease, the more I threw myself into work. That until one key moment in 2016.

I hit one of the lowest points in life in August that year. Sadly, my strategy of suppressing my emotions just fell flat at the time. Fortunately, I had planned to visit my sister and her kids in the month after. What was aimed to be a short vacation suddenly turned to be a very much needed getaway.

The pivotal incident took place at the zoo, when my nephew, Izan was walking around by himself, while his sister was in a stroller with my sister behind her. It was not their first time going to the zoo, therefore, they understood that they were not allowed to feed the animals. All things went as usual until suddenly Izan hid behind his sister’s stroller, only to be found munching his bread. When he was asked why he did that, he responded, “I don’t want to make them (the animals) drool over things that they cannot have.” Hearing that, I was stunned.

How come it was so natural for my nephew to think that way, and not at all for me? While I was proud of my nephew's answer, I was ashamed of myself.

Suddenly I understood that my attempt at denying my own emotions resulted in me denying others' too. *How can I expect to show compassion towards other beings, if I cannot do it towards my own self?* I still remember how I looked at him and broke down in tears.

Strangely and unexpectedly, that was the first time I felt better in months. After years of believing emotions were a weakness and a subject not to be discussed, that was the first time I got curious to better understand the purpose of emotions. My 6-year-old nephew was the one who taught me how to stay human.

Emotional intelligence and the rise of AI

In September 2016, news broke in Indonesia²: a fashion startup laid off hundreds of their employees, all of them from the customer service division. The CEO made a firm statement that they were focusing on building a sustainable and profitable business, and the way to do so was by cutting salary spending by 13%. A few months after, another news update came from another tech startup. They also happened to lay off 35 of their employees, again from the customer service division to "reduce the need for real human involvement in repetitive tasks to a minimum"³.

Mass unemployment is already happening. The only way to stop it is to stop the enhancement of AI. But obviously, no business can do that and stay in the game. Nobody wants to do it, so that is never going to happen. Therefore, the best way to deal with the situation is to prepare the people. But, the question is, how? When robots are acquiring more and more of humans' skills, what do we have left?

Peter Drucker famously said, "a person can perform only from strengths."⁴ This profound statement raises an obvious question: what are our strengths? The answer to this is very subjective, as one's strengths might not be the same as others'. However, when we think about it in a different context by seeing us, human beings, as one entity compared to Artificial Intelligence (AI), the answer is more definite. In fact, Peter Drucker already had an answer. "The computer is a logic machine, and that is its strengths—but also its limitation. Man, however, while not particularly logical is perceptive—and that is his strength."⁵ While our logic does matter, our consciousness, intuitions, and emotions also play key roles, especially in composing our strength as a human being.

In 1990, a psychology professor, John D. Mayer coined the term, *emotional intelligence*⁶ to describe this occurrence. He explained that it is the ability to accurately perceive, understand, and manage our own and others' emotions. Almost a decade after, a psychologist, Daniel Goleman made a compelling argument, that this emotional intelligence is actually "the sine qua non of leadership."

But what does emotional intelligence have to do with our humanness, technology, and the crisis in between? The answer is it does a lot.

James-Lange theory of emotion is one of theories that explains how and why human beings have emotions. It suggests that emotions occur because of physiological reactions to events⁷. According to this, robots will never have human emotions, because they will never have human bodies. While the latest robotic development⁸ shows that robots can recognize human emotions and respond accordingly, no proof shows that they can actually feel the emotions. Emotions is the thing that distinguishes us the most from robots. That means the skills related to practicing emotional intelligence are the ones that are essential to face this rapidly changing world. We cannot afford to not learn these skills and we must invest in nurturing them.

Sadly, however, these human-oriented skills are the ones that have generally been viewed as second priority in our culture. I can say that because the more I share the story of how I had avoided my emotions, the more I learn that I am not alone. My story was not an isolated one.

Then how can we create a culture that nurtures emotional intelligence in our organizations? Below is my recommendation.

Embracing vulnerabilities

Back to my earlier story, when I finally managed to get back to home after my vacation slash getaway, I continued to contemplate what happened. What other domains in my life that had been affected by my tendency to diminish emotions? Then I realized that it, too, had influenced the way I led my company and interacted with my surroundings.

While I was not a yeller, I was always intense. I did not use foul words but when I saw something that did not make sense, I would call it out without hesitation. I bombarded people with questions without much consideration whether the timing was right. I expected other people to see what I see, and I grew frustrated when they did not. And when people shared their feelings with me, my tendency was to jump to offering solutions. *I understand you are having a problem. Feeling aside, let's think about how to solve it.* Looking back, I knew the reason why I did what I did was because I was afraid of exposing my vulnerability.

In many cultures, being vulnerable is identified as being inept. In an organization, when it comes to emotion, the typical reaction is, "How unprofessional!" When the executive shows vulnerabilities, often they will be considered incompetent. And if a subordinate expresses their vulnerabilities, others will suspect that they are just making an excuse. Over time, I understood how this culture of denying the emotional part of human beings is not just inhumane, but also extremely problematic.

According to a research professor on vulnerability, Brené Brown, vulnerability is not a weakness.⁹ In our lives, the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure are not optional. How we

want to engage with it is where the choice lies. She mentions that our willingness to embrace vulnerabilities determines “the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose.” Meanwhile our attempt to protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our disconnection. Vulnerability is “the core of all emotions and feelings” and embracing it is the prerequisite to build emotional intelligence. This is profoundly important especially for leaders and decision makers. Because when we are willing to listen not just to our own vulnerabilities, but also to others’, we will be able to make decisions that are more considerate and compassionate for everyone involved.

In the context of AI, embracing vulnerability also has its utmost benefit. While robots can possibly *do* everything like us, they will never *feel* like us. This is a crucial point because, having spent the past two decades studying vulnerabilities and human connections, Brené finds that innovation only comes as the result of dealing with the feeling of doubt and being willing to face hard conversations. It is impossible to deal with those uncomfortable situations without putting oneself in a vulnerable position. She concludes that vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change—things that human has the clear advantage over AI.

In other words, when we do not accept vulnerability in our culture, not only are we veering away from establishing meaningful connections within, but we are also squandering innovation to prosper and losing our relevance in the world of AI.

AI and pro-human ideas

We can see that the common denominator among all innovations that benefit humankind is that at the heart of their development are human beings. Innovations have been made with the aim to improve quality of life, create equal opportunities for every individual, better our relationships with one another or help serve humanity. To ensure that technological advances work in our best interest, enhancing our holistic wellbeing should be the first and foremost goal.

However, that alone is not enough. We also need what I call *pro-human ideas*. Ideas that see people as human beings, who have the capacity to grow, to evolve, and to become. Ideas that embrace the fact that all human beings have the right to access equal opportunities to thrive. Ideas that mitigate the risk of technology toward humankind.

Reflecting on my experience of going through an emotional pain two years ago, I believe in the necessity of providing sanctioned allowances for mental and emotional well-being, as a way to cultivate emotional intelligence. Just like how we provide sanctioned allowances for our employees’ physical health; and have a doctor or physician to validate their physical states, we, too, should provide sanctioned allowances for our employees' mental and emotional well-being; and have a psychologist or psychiatrist to validate their mental and emotional state. According to World Health Organization, one in four people around the world will be affected

by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives¹⁰, which means that a substantial chunk of our workforce will be less productive and cannot function to the best of their capacity. Effective leaders understand that this is a lost opportunity, as it possibly risks the effectiveness of the whole team as well. We must be able to put things into perspective by seeing human capital as an asset rather than a cost.

On the other hand, pro-human ideas such as taxing businesses to pay for training for workers who lose their jobs to robots should have been considered. While it is a shame how this idea was rejected in 2017, we need to continue to think of similar initiatives which put humanity as their focus.

Being a human-centric leader himself, Peter Drucker proposed a thought-provoking pro-human idea. In 1950, he advocated “a predictable income and employment plan” and “profit sharing plan,”¹¹ where workers can get a minimum income as their right to economic security for a predetermined period of time—whether they work or not. This idea was obviously way ahead of its time, as we are now starting to talk about something that resonates. On a TED talk¹² in 2017, a historian Rutger Bregman explained the Universal Basic Income. He proposed that everyone should have the right to receive a monthly grant, that is enough to pay for basic needs, such as food, shelter, and education. This grant is completely unconditional with no stigma attached, so everyone is free to decide how to use it. As radical as it sounds, these kinds of ideas deserve to be entertained. Of course, there are questions that surround them. Is this basic income going to be implemented nationally or globally? What does it mean for countries with weak economies? How basic is basic? Can we afford it? But with the risk of robots taking over jobs holding the well-being of millions of people at stake, we must seriously consider any idea that can ensure the livelihood of human beings. I believe those questions do not prove that the idea is irrelevant. Those questions only prove that this is a new solution, which means it is worth trying.

With the right pro-human ideas that can guarantee the fulfillment of basic needs of humankind, the fact that robots take over some of our work in an efficient manner can potentially be good news. We do not need to stop the progress of AI for it actually improves the quality of our lives. What we need is pro-human ideas in place, that can allow us to make the very most of ourselves and gives us the opportunity to focus on what we do best as human beings. I firmly believe that when our well-beings as human beings are met, we will be able to create a whole new generation that can face the greatest challenges with intensely human-focused ideas.

Last thought

One of my most favorite Peter Drucker's theories on management is how he explained that it is all about human beings. It is how we need to know our strength and work on it so that our weakness becomes irrelevant. This resonates well with the current situation where robots taking over millions of our jobs. The most realistic way to deal with the advancement of AI is by embracing our humanness. We do not need to change human beings nor create super humans with super skills. Instead, we need to work on the strength that we already have by cultivating our emotional intelligence.

At the same time, stopping the development of AI is never the right option. My company has offered ethically-sourced natural beauty products for years, and technology has significantly helped us in reaching out and better serving our customers. The more customers we serve, the more farmers and artisans benefit. I strongly argue, that we need to continue to figure out how AI can be augmented as a part of every strategy that we have in supporting humankind. To minimize the risk that possibly occurs, we just need to promote pro-human ideas which put people's interest at its core.

Lastly, the leaders today must take a step further in supporting the well-being of the people. And this should include all aspects that influence our existence to prosper as a human being. It is our jobs to be done to continue to think about how to create an environment that belongs to the people and where the people feel belonged.

¹ Winch, G. 2014. Guy Winch: Why We All Need to Practice Emotional First Aid.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/guy_winch_the_case_for_emotional_hygiene]. Accessed June 15, 2018.

² Maulani, A. M. A. 2016. Promising Indonesian e-commerce platform SaleStock lays off "hundreds".

[<https://e27.co/promising-indonesian-e-commerce-platform-salestock-lays-off-hundreds-20160923/>]. Accessed June 15, 2018.

³ Freischlad, N. 2016. Indonesian speaking chatbots are here! Soon everyone can use them.

[<https://www.techinasia.com/kata-chatbot-platform-for-indonesian>]. Accessed June 15, 2018.

⁴ Drucker, P. F. 2017. Managing Oneself. Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, Boston.

⁵ Drucker, P. F. 2006. The Effective Executive. HarperCollins Publishers, New York.

⁶ 2017. HBR Guide to Emotional Intelligence. Harvard Business Review Press, Boston.

⁷ Davidson, R. J. 2015. The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think, Feel, and Live - And How You Can Change Them. Penguin Putnam Inc, New York.

⁸ Hall, L. 2017. How We Feel About Robots That Feel. [<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/609074/how-we-feel-about-robots-that-feel/>]. Accessed June 15, 2018.

⁹ Brown, B. 2012. Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead. Penguin Random House, London.

¹⁰ World Health Organization. (001. Mental disorders affect one in four people.

[http://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/]. Accessed June 15, 2018.

¹¹ Drucker, P. F. 1993. The New Society: The Anatomy of Industrial Order. Taylor & Francis Inc, Somerset.

¹² Bregman, R. 2017. Poverty isn't a lack of character; it's a lack of cash.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/rutger_bregman_poverty_isn_t_a_lack_of_character_it_s_a_lack_of_cash]. Accessed June 15, 2018.