

Innovation with a Higher Purpose

Gerd Leonhard is a futurist who is listed by *Wired Magazine* as one of the top 100 most influential people in Europe. In this brief Q&A he outlines his new book, *Technology vs Humanity*, and how it relates to our profession



How soon can we expect automation to have a significant impact on the labor market?

We're looking at the point where in roughly ten years all the things that were science fiction become possible. Nanobots in my bloodstream cleaning cholesterol, for example. It means we will find ways to bring more machines to the labor market. For example, rather than calling your assistant, you just speak to a device and it will book the flight when you want it to.

But this is also where my colleague Paul Saffo, who is a leading futurist in San Francisco, likes to say "we should not mistake a clear view for a short distance". So yes all of these things will be possible but I think it will take longer for them to be commercially relevant. For example, people get ahead of themselves when thinking about self-driving cars. We're not too far away from being about to travel around cities at 20mph but being in a self-driving car on a motorway is a long way away.

Technological unemployment and human de-skilling are two slightly scary sounding phrases that are mentioned in the introduction to your book several times. Is there a corporate responsibility to consider how technological growth could begin to impact humanity on a wide scale? Will this require a shift in mindset for most business leaders?

The problem with technology is that people are barking up the wrong tree by saying it is all about efficiency and margins. It's really not about that. It's that once you've reached peak efficiency, what do you do next?

If you don't question 'why?' then you end up in a place that is in technological overdrive. So how do we deal with that power we have and put it into context? How do we create rules about what is acceptable and who is in charge?

If it's true that we're not too far away from a future where machines can talk like us, work like us and think like us, what makes us human?

That's the ultimate question. What humans do is to a very high degree not data. Basically it will be a long time before we can understand the workings of the giant machine that is the human body. Things like compassion, values, feelings and emotions make us human. We can meet somebody for one second in a hallway and we will immediately know who that person is, which computers can't do. 99% of what we are is not specific or algorithmic – at least to the point that we can understand it. ■



Chapter 1: A Prologue to the Future

Humanity will change more in the next 20 years than in the previous 300 years.

Human beings have a habit of extrapolating the future from the present, or even the past. The assumption is that whatever worked well for us up to now should, in some slightly improved shape or form, also serve us nicely in the future. Yet the new reality is that, because of the increased impact of exponential and combinatorial technological changes, the future is actually very unlikely to be an extension of the present. Rather, it is certain to be utterly different—because the assumption framework and the underlying logic have changed.

Therefore, in my work as a futurist I try to intuit, imagine, and immerse myself in the near future (five to eight years out), present views from that world, and then work my way back to the present from there rather than towards it.

Starting with a report from that near future, this book goes on to explore the challenges and lay out a manifesto, a passionate call to stop and think before we all get swept up in the magic vortex of technology, and eventually become fundamentally less rather than more human. This is a good time to remember that the future does not just happen to us—it is created by us, every day, and we will be held responsible for the decisions we make at this very moment.

A historic inflection point

I feel that we are living in one of the most exciting times in the history of mankind, and I am generally very optimistic about the future. However, we definitely need to define and practice a more holistic approach to technology governance in order to safeguard the very essence of what being human means.

We are at the inflection point of an exponential curve in many fields of science and technology (S&T), a point where the doubling from each measurement period to the next is becoming vastly more significant.

At the heart of the story of exponential change lies Moore's Law—a concept which originated in the 1970s, and which, simply put, suggests that the processing speed (i.e. the amount of computer processing power on a chip) that we can buy for US\$1,000 doubles roughly every 18–24 months.

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This exponential pace of development is now evident in fields as diverse as deep learning, genetics, material sciences, and manufacturing. The time required for each exponential performance step is also declining in many fields, and this is driving the potential for fundamental change across every activity on the planet. In practical terms, we are now past the stage in the life of the curve where it was difficult to gauge that something is happening at all, i.e. we are no longer moving in small steps from 0.01 to 0.02 or 0.04 to 0.08.

At the same time, fortunately, we are not yet at the point where those doublings are so great that the results will overwhelm our understanding and inhibit our capacity to act. To put things in perspective, in my view we are at a relative performance

level of around four in most fields, and the next exponential step will take us to eight, rather than a more linear rise to five! This is the very moment when exponential increases are starting to really matter, and technology is now driving exponential changes in every sector of our society, from energy, transportation, communications, and media, to medicine, health, food, and energy.

Witness the recent changes in the car industry—during the past seven years we've gone from electric cars with a range of less than 50 miles to the latest Tesla and BMWi8 promising over 300 miles on a single charge. We've also gone from a handful of charging locations to the astounding fact that New York City already has more electric vehicle (EV) charging stations than gas stations. Nearly every month there's a new breakthrough in battery efficiency, a limitation which has for the past decades been one of the biggest barriers to mass adoption of EVs. Soon we'll charge our EVs just once a week, then once a month, and eventually maybe just once a year—and then it seems likely that very few people will still be interested in huge luxury cars with good old gas engines!

Witness the even more dramatic cost decline in human genome sequencing, with the price falling from around US\$10 million in 2008 to approximately US\$800 today. Imagine what might happen when exponentially more powerful supercomputers move into the cloud and become available to every medical facility or lab: The cost of sequencing an individual's genome should quickly drop below US\$50.

Next, imagine the genome profiles of some two billion people uploaded to a secure cloud (hopefully in an anonymized way!) for use in research, development, and analysis—much of it performed by

artificial intelligence (AI) running on those very same supercomputers. The scientific possibilities that will be unleashed will blow away anything we have dreamed of, while simultaneously bringing enormous ethical challenges: dramatic longevity increases for those that have the budget, the ability to reprogram the human genome, and—potentially—the end of aging, or even dying. Will the rich live forever while the poor still can't even afford malaria pills?

Such exponential developments suggest that continuing to imagine our future in a linear way will probably lead to catastrophically flawed assumptions about the scale, speed, and potential impacts of change. That may be part of the reason why so many people cannot seem to grasp

the growing concerns about technology trumping humanity—it all seems so far away, and, for now, rather harmless because we are only at four on this curve. Issues such as the increasing loss of privacy, technological unemployment, or human deskilling are still not in-our-faces enough—but this is bound to change very quickly.

It is also important to realize that the biggest shifts will happen because of combinatorial innovation, i.e. by the simultaneous exploitation of several Megashifts and elements of disruption. For example, in chapter 3, we'll discuss how we are increasingly seeing companies combining big data and the Internet of Things (IoT) along with AI, mobility, and the cloud to create extremely disruptive new offerings.

Suffice to say that nothing and no one will be untouched by the changes in store for us, whether they are realized with good will, while ignoring or neglecting to consider the unintended consequences, or with harmful intent. On the one hand, unimaginable technological breakthroughs may dramatically improve our lives and hugely further human flourishing (see chapter 9); on the other, some of these exponential technological changes are likely to threaten the very fabric of society and ultimately challenge our very humanness.

In 1993, computer scientist and famed science fiction author Vernor Vinge wrote:

Within 30 years, we will have the technological means to create

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superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended. Is such progress avoidable? If not to be avoided, can events be guided so that we may survive?

Welcome to HellVen!

It is becoming clearer that the future of human-machine relations very much depends on the economic system that creates them. We are facing what I like to call HellVen (i.e. a blend of hell/heaven) challenges (#hellven). We are moving at warp speed towards a world that may resemble Nirvana, where we may no longer have to work for a living, most problems are solved by technology, and we enjoy a kind of universal abundance—sometimes referred to as the Star Trek economy.

However, the future could also usher in a dystopian society that is orchestrated and overseen by supercomputers, networked bots, and super-intelligent software agents—machines and algorithms, cyborgs and robots—or rather, by those who own them. A world where non-augmented humans might be tolerated as pets or as a necessary nuisance at best, or, at worst, enslaved by a cabal of cyborg gods; a dark society that would be deskilled, desensitized, disembodied, and altogether dehumanized.

"You may live to see man-made horrors beyond your comprehension."

—Nikola Tesla

Is this a paranoid view?

Let's consider what some of us are already witnessing in our daily lives: Low-cost, ubiquitous digital technologies have made it possible for us to outsource our thinking, our decisions, and our memories to ever-cheaper mobile devices and the intelligent clouds

behind them. These "external brains" are morphing quickly from knowing-me to representing-me to being-me. In fact, they are starting to become a digital copy of us—and if that thought is not worrying you yet, imagine the power of this external brain amplified 100x in the next five years.

Navigating a strange city? Impossible without Google Maps. Can't decide where to eat tonight? TripAdvisor will tell me. No time to answer all my emails? Gmail's new intelligent assistant will do it for me.

As far as man-machine convergence is concerned, we're not quite in a land

"Game-changing advances such as machine intelligence and deep learning, the IoT, and human genome editing are beginning to intersect and amplify each other."

where we stay at home while our cyborg doubles live out our lives for us, as in the 2009 Bruce Willis film *Surrogates*. Nor are we yet able to purchase human-like synths that can undertake a range of tasks and provide companionship as in the 2015 AMC TV series *Humans*—but we're not that far away either. In this book I will explain why I do not think the dystopian scenario is likely to happen. At the same time, I will argue that we are now facing some fundamental choices when it comes to deciding and planning how far we will allow technology to impact and shape our lives, the lives of our loved ones, and the lives of future generations. Some pundits may say we are already beyond the point of preventing such changes, and that this

is just the next stage in our "natural" evolution. I strongly disagree and will explain how I think humans can emerge as winners in this coming clash between man and machines.

Technology and humanity are converging, and we are at a pivot point

As I started writing this book and weaving the themes into my talks, three important words rose to the top and stood out—exponential, combinatorial, and recursive.

1. Exponential.

Technology is progressing exponentially. Even though the basic laws of physics may prevent microchips from becoming significantly smaller than they already are today, technological progress in general is still following Moore's Law. The performance curve continues to rise exponentially, rather than in the gradual or linear way humans tend to understand and expect. This represents a huge cognitive challenge for us: Technology grows exponentially, while humans (hopefully, I would add) remain linear.

2. Combinatorial.

Technological advances are being combined and integrated. Game-changing advances such as machine intelligence and deep learning, the IoT, and human genome editing are beginning to intersect and amplify each other. They are no longer applied just in specific individual domains—instead they are causing ripples across a multitude of sectors. For example, advanced human gene editing technologies such as CRISPR-Cas9 may eventually allow us to beat cancer and dramatically increase longevity. These are developments that would upend the entire logic of healthcare, social security, work, and even capitalism itself.

3. Recursive.

Technologies such as AI, cognitive computing, and deep learning may eventually lead to recursive (i.e. selfamplifying) improvements. For example, we are already seeing the first examples of robots that can reprogram or upgrade themselves or control the power grid that keeps them alive, potentially leading to what has been called an intelligence explosion. Some, such as Oxford academic Nick Bostrom, believe this could lead to the emergence of super-intelligence—AI systems which could one day learn faster and out-think humans in almost every regard. If we can engineer AIs with an IQ of 500, what would keep us from building

others with an IQ of 50,000—and what could happen if we did?

Thankfully, recursive super-intelligence is not yet on the immediate horizon. However, even without such challenges, we are already grappling with some rapidly escalating issues, such as the constant tracking of our digital lives, surveillance-by-default, diminishing privacy, the loss of anonymity, digital identity theft, data security, and much more. That is why I am convinced the groundwork for the future of humanity—positive or dystopian—is being laid here, today.

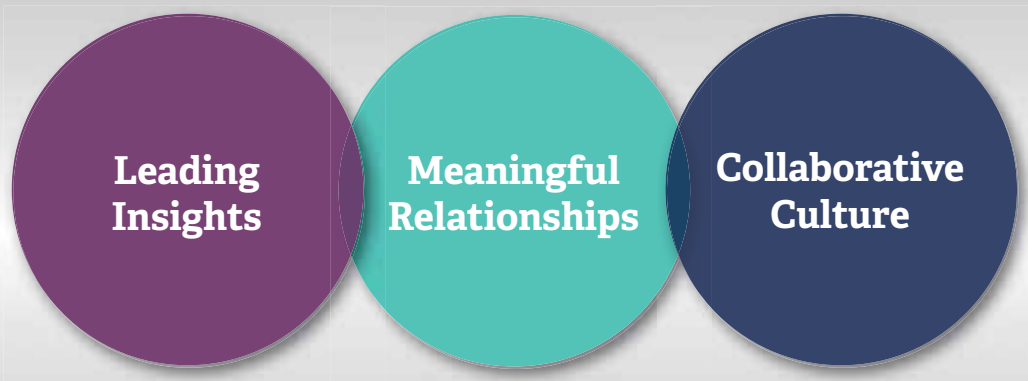
We are at a crucial junction, and we must act with much greater foresight, with a decidedly more holistic view, and with

much stronger stewardship as we unleash technologies that could end up having infinitely more power over us than we could ever imagine.

We can no longer adopt a wait-and-see attitude if we want to remain in control of our destiny and the developments that could shape it. Rather, we must pay equally as much attention to what it will mean to be or remain human in the future (i.e. what defines us as humans) as we spend on developing infinitely more powerful technologies that will change humanity forever.

We should take great care to not just leave these decisions to "free markets," to venture capitalists, corporate technologists, or the world's most powerful military

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organizations. The future of humanity should not be about some generic, Industrial Age paradigm of profit and growth at all costs, or some outmoded technological imperative that may have served us well in the 1980s. Neither Silicon Valley nor the world's most technologized nations should end up becoming "mission control for humanity" just because technology generates vast new revenue streams and large profits.

Thankfully, I believe we are still at a 90/10 point right now: 90% of the amazing possibilities presented by technology could play out well for humanity, while 10% might already be troublesome or negative. If we can maintain that balance, or bring it up to 98/2, that would be worth every effort. At the same time, that troubling 10% (even if mostly unintended at this time) may quickly balloon to 50% or more if we do not agree on exactly how we want these technologies to serve humanity. This is clearly not a good time to just "push ahead and see what happens."

Artificial intelligence and human genome editing are the two primary game changers

The first major force in the realm of exponential technologies is AI, simply defined as creating machines (software or robots) that are intelligent and capable of self-learning—i.e. more human-like thinking machines. The capability of AI is widely projected to grow twice as fast as all other technologies, exceeding Moore's Law and the growth of computing power, in general.

"By far the greatest danger of artificial intelligence is that people conclude too early that they understand it."

—Eliezer Yudkowsky

The companion game changer to AI is human genome engineering: altering

human DNA to put an end to some if not all diseases, reprogram our bodies, and possibly even end death. Indeed, AI will be a critical enabler of such reprogramming.

These two game changers and their scientific neighbors will have huge impact on what humans can and will be in less than 20 years. In this book, in the interests of brevity, I will focus in particular on AI and deep learning because of their immediate relevance to our future and their enabling role in the development

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of other "game changer" fields such as human genome editing, nanotechnology and material sciences.

Becoming as God?

Dr. Ray Kurzweil, currently Google's Director of Engineering, is a great influence on futurist thinking in general and on my own work, but also someone whose views I must often challenge in this book. Kurzweil predicts that computers will surpass the processing power of a single human brain by 2025, and that a single computer may match the power of all human brains combined by 2050. Kurzweil suggests these developments will herald the advent of the so-called Singularity, the moment when computers finally trump and then surpass human brains in computing power. This is the moment when human intelligence

may become increasingly nonbiological, when it may be possible for machines to independently, and quite likely recursively, go beyond their original programming—a decisive moment in human history.

Ray Kurzweil told his audience at Singularity University in late 2015: "As we evolve, we become closer to God. Evolution is a spiritual process. There is beauty and love and creativity and intelligence in the world—it all comes from the neocortex. So we're going to expand the brain's neocortex and become more godlike."

I also believe the point of computers having the capacity of the human brain is not far off, but—God or no God—unlike Dr. Kurzweil, I do not think we should willingly give up our humanness in return for the possibility of attaining unlimited nonbiological intelligence. That strikes me as a very bad bargain, a downgrade rather than an upgrade, and in this book I will explain why I passionately believe we should not go down that road.

Right now, in 2016, computers simply do not have the power to deliver on Kurzweil's vision. I believe the chips are still too big, networks still do not have the speed, and the electricity grid by and large cannot support machines that would need this much power. Obviously, these are temporary hurdles: Every day we hear announcements of major scientific breakthroughs and, in addition, numerous unpublicized advances are certain to be happening in secret in labs around the world.

We need to be ready for the Singularity: open yet critical, scientific yet humanistic, adventurous and curious yet armed with precaution, and entrepreneurial yet collectively-minded.

Science fiction is becoming science fact

Very soon, machines will be able to do things that once were the sole domain of

human workers—blue collar and white collar alike—such as understanding language, complex image recognition, or using our body in highly flexible and adaptive ways. By then, we will no doubt be utterly dependent on machines in every aspect of our lives. We will also likely see a rapid merging of man and machine via new types of interfaces such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), holograms, implants, brain-computer interfaces (BCI), and body parts engineered with nanotechnology and synthetic biology.

If and when things such as nanobots in our bloodstream or communications implants in our brains become possible, who will decide what is human? If (as I like to say) technology does not (and probably should not) have ethics, what will happen with our norms, social contracts, values, and morals when machines run everything for us?

For the foreseeable future, despite the claims of AI evangelists, I believe machine intelligence will not include emotional intelligence or ethical concerns, because machines are not beings—they are duplicators and simulators. Yet eventually, machines will be able to read, analyze, and possibly understand our value systems, social contracts, ethics, and beliefs—but they will never be able to exist in, or be a part of, the world as we are (what German philosophers like to call *dasein*).

But regardless, will we live in a world where data and algorithms triumph over what I call androrithms, all that stuff that makes us human? (I will define exactly what I believe an androrithm is later in this book.)

Again, successive doublings from 4 to 8 to 16 to 32 are a whole lot different in impact than the doublings from 0.1 to 0.8. This is one of our toughest challenges today: We

must imagine an exponentially different tomorrow, and we must become stewards of a future whose complexity may well go far beyond current human understanding. In a way, we must become exponentially imaginative.

Gradually, then suddenly

For me, this line from Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* describes the nature of exponential change perfectly:

"How did you go bankrupt?"

"Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly."

When thinking about creating our future, it is essential to understand these twin memes of exponentiality and gradually then suddenly, and both are key messages

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in this book. Increasingly, we will see the humble beginnings of a huge opportunity or threat. And then, all of a sudden, it is either gone and forgotten or it is here, now, and much bigger than imagined. Think of solar energy, autonomous vehicles, digital currencies, and the blockchain: All took a long time to play out, but all of a sudden, they are here and they are roaring. History tells us that those who adapt too slowly or fail to foresee the pivot points will suffer the consequences.

Wait and see is very likely going to mean waiting to become irrelevant, or simply to be ignored, outmoded, and to wither away. Thus, we need another strategy for defining and retaining what makes us human in this quickly digitizing world.

I tend to think that markets will not self-regulate and deal with these issues by means of an “invisible hand.” Rather, traditional profit-and-growth-driven open markets will only escalate the challenges of humanity versus technology because these very same technologies are likely to generate opportunities worth trillions of dollars per year. Replacing human qualities, interactions, or idiosyncrasies with technology is simply too much of a business opportunity to question. For example, Peter Diamandis, a board member of a California company aptly called Human Longevity Inc., often proclaims that increasing longevity would create a US\$3.5 trillion global market. These irresistible new frontiers are likely to trump any such minor concern as the future of humanness.

Beyond mission control

In the end, we are talking about the survival and the flourishing of the human species, and I believe it just won't do to have venture capitalists, stock markets, and the military running the show on their own.

In the near future, we are certain to see some very tough battles between opposing world-views and paradigms with gigantic economic interests facing off against each other, a kind of humanists versus transhumanists' showdown. Now

that oil and other fossil fuels are declining as the driving force of politics and military concerns, the US and China are already at the forefront of an accelerating technological arms race. The new wars will be digital, and the battle is being waged for leadership in exponential game changers such as AI, human genome modification, the IoT, cyber security, and digital warfare. Europe (including and especially Switzerland, where I live) is somewhat stuck in the middle, more concerned with what many would see as lofty issues such as human rights, happiness, balance, ethics, and sustainable and collective well-being. As I'll explain, I believe addressing these concerns is actually our big opportunity here in Europe.

There are already global tribes of opinion leaders, serial entrepreneurs, scientists, venture capitalists, and assorted tech gurus (and yes, futurists as well) busy promoting a quick voluntary departure from humanism altogether. These techno-progressives are urging us to “transcend humanity” and embrace the next step in our evolution, which is, of course, to merge biology with technology, to alter and augment our minds and bodies and, in effect, become superhuman, ending disease (good) and even death— an alluring yet bizarre quest.

Interest in this notion of transhumanism is on the rise, and to me it is one of the most troubling developments I have observed in my 15 years of being a futurist. It is frankly a rather delusional idea to try and achieve human happiness by seeking to transcend humanity altogether through technological means.

For context, here are two contrasting positions on the concept, as laid out by transhumanism advocate and 2016 US Presidential Candidate Zoltan Istvan and the philosopher Jesse I. Bailey:

The Protagonist.

Istvan writes in his 2013 novel *The Transhumanist Wager*: The bold code of the transhumanist will rise. That's an inevitable, undeniable fact. It's embedded in the undemocratic nature of technology

and our own teleological evolutionary advancement. It is the future. We are the future, like it or not. And it needs to [be] molded, guided, and handled correctly by the strength and wisdom of transhumanist scientists with their nations and resources standing behind them, facilitating them. It needs to be supported in a way that we can make a successful transition into it, and not sacrifice ourselves—either by its overwhelming power or by a fear of harnessing that power.

You need to put your resources into the technology. Into our education system. Into our universities, industries, and ideas. Into the strongest of our society. Into the brightest of our society. Into the best of our society. So that we can attain the future.

The Humanist.

Challenging this position, Bailey writes in *The Journal of Evolution and Technology*: I argue that by threatening to obscure death as a foundational possibility for dasein (human existence), transhumanism poses the danger of hiding the need to develop a free and authentic relation to technology, Truth, and ultimately to dasein itself.

Transhumanists often make one of two claims: Either the body we inhabit now will be able to live for hundreds of years or our consciousness will be downloadable into multiple bodies. Either of these positions (in subtly, but importantly, different ways) alienates human experience from central aspects of the finitude of embodiment.

Heidegger locates being-toward-death as central to the call to authenticity, and away from lostness in the they-self (for whom technological enframing holds sway); by threatening our awareness of our own mortality, transhumanism thus threatens to occlude the call to authenticity, just as it occludes the need for it.

It is clear that technological determinism is not the solution, and that the prevailing

Silicon Valley ideology that argues, “Why don’t we just invent our way out of this, have loads of fun, make lots of money while also improving the lives of billions of people with these amazing new technologies?” could prove to be just as lazy—and dangerous—as Luddism.

In respectful contrast to some transhumanists’ rather Cartesian or reductionist views of humanity’s future (i.e. vastly simplified and reduced to looking at the world—and people—as a giant machine), this book will strive to outline a mindset and Digital Age philosophy that I sometimes call exponential humanism. Through this philosophy, I believe we can find a balanced way forward that will allow us to embrace technology but not become technology, to use it as a tool and not as a purpose.

To safeguard humanity’s future, we must invest as much energy in furthering

humanity as we do in developing technology. I believe that if we want a world that remains a good place for humans, with all our imperfections and inefficiencies, we must put significant resources (monetary and otherwise) into defining what a new kind of exponential humanism may actually entail. It will not be enough to just invest into the technologies that promise to make us superhuman—as we will soon ride on the shoulders of machines whose workings we don’t even understand any more.

If we don’t become more proactive on these issues, I worry that an exponential, unfettered, and uncontrolled intelligence explosion in robotics, AI, bioengineering, and genetics will eventually lead to a systematic disregard of the basic principles of human existence, because technology does not have ethics—but a society without ethics is doomed.

This dichotomy is arising everywhere:

Pretty much everything that can be digitized, automated, virtualized, and robotized probably will be, yet there are some things we should not attempt to digitize or automate—because they define what we are as humans.

This book explores where exponential and converging technologies might take us in the next ten years, highlights what is at stake, and explores what we can do about it today. No matter what your philosophical or religious persuasion, you will probably agree that technology has already entered our daily lives to such a vast degree that any further exponential progress will surely demand a new kind of conversation about where the advances are taking us, and why. Just as technology is literally about to enter our bodies and biological systems, it is time for a tribal pow-wow—the most important conversation the human tribe may ever have. ■

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