

Rik A.L. Vera

THE HUMAN RENAISSANCE

LETTERS TO HUMANS AND MACHINES

A MANIFESTO

to help humanity thrive
in the age of intelligent machines



VANDUUREN
MEDIA

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RENAISSANCE**

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*A manifesto for learning to think deeply again
in the age of intelligent machines*

Think fast. Think deep. For heaven's sake, do not confuse the two.

Rik A.L. Vera



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MEDIA

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Know thyself.

– *Inscription on the temple of Delphi*

The unexamined life is not worth living.

– *Socrates*

THE FLOOD AND THE SIX QUESTIONS



LETTER ONE

The renaissance nobody had announced



Something is happening. Not only in boardrooms, universities, tech labs and other places where people like to use fancy buzzwords to avoid admitting that they do not fully understand what is going on either, but also at kitchen tables, in offices, in schools, in WhatsApp groups, in cars, on terraces and inside the heads of people who thought their lives were more or less arranged and who now suddenly notice that somewhere under the floor a question has started to hum. It is a question they may have asked once, long ago, when they were nineteen and believed that three beers, a book by Nietzsche and a night that lasted much too long were enough to understand life. Then the real life arrived. Work. Children. Mortgages. Deadlines. Excel. More Excel. And the big questions were folded away neatly in a drawer with a label on it that said, later, perhaps, when there is time.

But there is no later anymore, because the machines have started answering.

That is awkward. As long as machines only did what we asked them to do, we could continue to pretend that we knew exactly what we were doing. A machine mowed the lawn, washed clothes, drilled holes, lifted more weight, calculated faster, pro-

duced cheaper and otherwise left us alone in the comfortable illusion that intelligence was something exclusively human, something with warm breath, a little doubt, one or two childhood wounds and preferably an espresso beside it. Now there is suddenly a thing without a body, without a childhood, without a bad night of sleep and without a pension plan, and that thing writes, reasons, summarizes, codes, designs, analyses, composes and sometimes even behaves as if it understands us, which is more than can be said of some managers, and so the questions return.

What does it actually mean to be intelligent? Is creativity the making of something out of nothing, or was that always an elegant way of rearranging fragments that already existed? When do you know a fact, and when do you understand something? Where does information end and wisdom begin? What is a mind, once you scrape the romance away and leave only the restless machinery inside? And perhaps the most uncomfortable question of all: if a machine can do more and more of what we thought made us special, what remains of us?

Those questions used to belong to philosophers, poets, professors with elbow patches and old men in cafes who could sit too long with one glass of beer. Today they belong to CEOs, teachers, doctors, parents, policymakers, designers, programmers, artists and frankly to everyone who opens a laptop on Monday morning, looks at the screen for a second and thinks, oh dear.

The abstract has become operational. What is intelligence, that used to be a seminar question, something with chairs in a

circle and coffee that tasted like cardboard. Now it is a hiring decision, a product roadmap, a strategic choice, a budget discussion, a school policy and a vote on a law. What makes us human, that used to belong to poets and thinkers, people from whom one accepted that they did not immediately make everything measurable. Today you need a workable answer before you decide which pieces of your job, and of the future jobs of your children, you hand over to a system that never sleeps, never falls ill, never asks for a raise and never tells HR that it does not feel seen.

I once wrote a short column about that. The argument was simple: the arrival of artificial intelligence may not be primarily a technological revolution, but a philosophical one. I expected a few polite reactions, a handful of thumbs, some people saying it had made them think, which usually means they liked it and then continued scrolling. But something else happened. The text began to travel, and what came back were not technical remarks about models, parameters, benchmarks or the latest toy box from Silicon Valley. What came back were confessions.

An engineer wrote to me that he could no longer explain to his daughter why his work mattered. A teacher told me she no longer knew what exactly she was preparing her pupils for. A man in his sixties sent me two sentences that remained in the room like smoke: I have spent my whole life building things, but I have never once asked what they were for.

There it was. Not the fear of the machine, or not only that. The fear that perhaps we had been behaving mechanically for far longer than we wanted to admit. That for years we had been run-

ning forward, faster and faster, with better tools, bigger targets, smarter dashboards, sharper KPIs, tighter quarterly reports and a kind of busy seriousness that always mistakes itself for progress, without often stopping for the childishly simple question that can ruin everything: why, actually?

And then AI arrived. Not as an answer, but as a disturbance. Not as saviour, not as enemy, not as a magical intern who never goes home and never asks whether he can leave early on Friday, but as something that switches on the light in a room where we had not looked around for a long time. What startles us may not be the thing entering the room. It may be what we suddenly see standing there. Ourselves.

That is why I call this a renaissance. Not because it looks better on a slide, although that always helps, but because historically it is the right word. The first Renaissance did not begin with a deep idea, a genius painter or an offsite session with post its and a facilitator who says that all ideas are welcome. It began with a machine. The printing press. Gutenberg, Mainz, fifteenth century. A goldsmith who assembled existing things into a working system: movable metal letters, a suitable ink and a press borrowed from the world of wine, which proves that much of civilization is ultimately indebted to grapes.

That machine broke a monopoly on knowledge that had lasted for a thousand years and flooded Europe with more thoughts than it had ever learned to process. And the moment information became abundant, scarcity shifted. Access was no longer the highest good. Judgment became the highest good. The wisdom to read inside the flood, to choose, to doubt, to dis-

tinguish, to decide what was true, what was false, what was useful, what was dangerous, what was noise and what gave direction.

We are now living inside the sequel, and our machine makes the printing press look like a child's toy. The printing press could copy what existed. AI generates what did not yet exist, instantly, in every language, about every subject, for everyone with a telephone and a little Wi-Fi. The printing press made texts abundant. AI makes answers abundant. Infinite, even, for all practical purposes. And as soon as answers become infinite, the value of the answer falls and the value of the question rises. I like that. History has a sense of humour.

This manifesto, and I stubbornly keep saying that it is not a book, is that suspicion taken seriously and turned into a refusal. I refuse to participate in the theatre in which the machine is the hero and the human being waits somewhere in the wings for replacement or salvation. The doomer says the machine will erase us. The evangelist says the machine will save us. They make the same mistake, only with a different facial expression. In both cases the machine is the protagonist and we stand around as extras with a badge around our neck. I pass.

The machine is not the protagonist of this story. We are.

Everything AI brings to the surface, every awkward question about intelligence, creativity, compassion, curiosity, work, learning and humanity, was always a question about us. The machine has merely walked in, switched on the light and placed the invoice for centuries of postponement under our nose. That feels unpleasant. That is exactly why it is useful.

In the first part I build the frame: why this is a second renaissance, why it follows a pattern we have seen before, and why the gap between what we can do and what we are wise enough to live with becomes the defining problem of this decade. In the second part I take hold of six questions that will shape the coming years: what makes us human, what intelligence really is, what compassion means in a world prepared and steered by algorithms, what separates real creativity from brilliant imitation, why curiosity has quietly become the most valuable capacity a human being can possess, and how we learn to work with the machine and without the machine, so that we do not end as people who can prompt perfectly but can no longer think.

This is not for specialists, and you do not need to know how these systems work under the hood to follow the argument. It is for the engineer who can no longer explain to his daughter why his work matters. For the teacher who no longer knows what she is preparing her pupils for. For the man who built things his whole life and never asked what for. For everyone who has felt, over the last few years, a low persistent hum of a question without being able to name it.

That hum is this: we have spent so long building tools to increase our power that we forgot to ask what that power was for. Now we have built the most powerful tool in our history, and it places the question back in our hands, sharper than ever, unavoidable and personally addressed to each of us. That is not a curse. It is a gift, though it comes wrapped in panic, jargon and LinkedIn posts with too many rocket emojis.

The ancient Greeks carved two simple pieces of advice into the heart of their civilization: know thyself and live wisely. We have covered them with PowerPoint, KPIs, productivity tools and an unhealthy love of dashboards, but the question never disappeared. It waited. And now it knocks on the door again.

So let us begin where the first Renaissance began. Not with an idea. With a machine.

