11/01/2026

My employment here does not guarantee my relevance.
When I teach, I often give the three foundational principles:

Nothing is supposed to be obvious
Nothing is supposed to be interesting
There is no such thing as a stupid question

We now live in a world where some of the struggle that defines being at MIT has been eroded. Students can talk to a computer, I can talk to a computer about my teaching, about my life, about my relationship, anxieties, and insecurities about myself and how best to write a problem about the godforsaken Hermian.

Questions emerge: what is the point of anything?
I start to look at crowds of people and wonder if we are building our successors on this planet.
I have not landed on an answer, and indeed everyone is in some way trying to land on something.
What I think I have landed on is a vibe. In a world where a computer can do much of human activity (and forgive if I am ahead of my time by suggesting so), what is the point of doing anything? This question

has a weird taste in that it's never the same taste. At times it's something I ask with a sort of hopeless resignation — then I feel a fist in the pit of my abdomen or stomach and long to curl up on the floor of my apartment with a space heater pointed at me. I've done it before, with thoughts of the world like an apple whirling silently in space as nature takes us inevitably to a grim but hard-coded demise.

Nothing is supposed to be interesting, nothing is supposed to be obvious. The second flavor that that inevitable question of "what is the point of doing anything" has, it comes from "nothing is supposed to be interesting, nothing is supposed to be obvious." We are going to live with computers; the answer — or at least the flavor of the answer — is being human. At times we interact with people and find that we're not actually interacting with them — we're interacting with the ROLE they are playing. I call these people, on occasion, tools. It's a word I learned from a student when I worked at EIG in 2018. He was telling me about his advisor in the mainstream curriculum and I felt insulted. But in the years since, I've come to not only understand, but appreciate what he was telling me. This student said that his advisor

wasn't leveling with him. He wasn't being a Person.
It's 2026 and it's beginning to look like The Future
and the last thing we need to do is act like computers.
What is being human? It's not being perfectly polished
or Procedural or predictable or useless. It's precisely
NOT having a reason or an explanation for everything
we do — why don't I just switch pens instead of
insisting on this ONE pen I like but that doesn't
like me? — it's being idiosyncratic and fascinating
and all that we, when we comb away the layers of
societal BS that we didn't understand as infants and
won't understand when we're old enough to again
not care, innately as humans are. We're curious
long before we know what curiosity could be useful for.
We seem to seek community and people
with whom to share in ways we can't always explain.
I often ask students to introduce themselves with
their superpower. Not good grades, not anything they
can get by being clever within a particular system, but
"in a perfect vacuum, what gives you life?"
This has ALWAYS been an important question
— and indeed I've often used it in a pre-AI
world to encourage students to see the fact that
society seems really to value you having the

letter M.I.T. stamped on your head enough for you to get away with plenty. Lots of useless startups whose best product is "founded by MIT alumni" on LinkedIn. Lots of people who make bank working at Big Company™ straight out of... M.I.T. Who among those in either care is stuck on a hamster wheel of their own brilliant "M.I.T." design unable to look to the side and say "wait, do I like what I'm doing?"

What is the point of doing anything? Reply:

What is the point of doing something?

And I think that's where we are. Why does my student Anna Kim propel a boat down a river? Why does Harin try to do a one-arm pull-up? Why do I? This isn't older times; people don't be running into bears on the street that they need to punch or kick or hang from a streetlight to avoid, I believe.

The question of motivation is easy to ignore when the thing you may aimlessly be doing gives results you like. In a sea of nothingness, you still advance but grow blind. There are times no one's looking, for the lies they don't see.

During the pandemic, in 2020 — a year often sounding like and billed as "The future" — students discovered that

dreary "Zoom University" was just a televised reprint of what they went out of their way physically and financially to do in person — and it was lifeless. The pandemic highlighted conspicuously good teaching because it eroded distraction from "why am I doing this?" In fact, it generated questions like this: "why am I paying thousands or tens of thousands of dollars to watch someone ten meters in front of me who doesn't know who I am explain something with limited quality that I could go and teach myself — or watch in a video online from the comfort of home?" Human nature and its many questions, a beautiful cynicism that ironically gives faith in humanity: Nothing is supposed to be interesting. The pandemic weeded out bad teaching and highlighted the humanity of leveling with people, working with our hands, and community. It unlocked an appreciation for these things — and in a certain sense, selected for those who were looking to create and receive that in their education, if not in their world as a whole. We cannot, we should not, as it is

incompatible with anything someone would organically seek, make this about knowing what is most wholesome for a group of people. Policing with a pretty flower at the tip of the barrel of a gun is still policing. A lovely house without a door is still a prison. Enforcing taste is futile because, at scale, anything suffers from the world's epidemic of poor taste — is it baked-in, hard-coded into humanity? Maybe, but it doesn't matter. In this moment, <u>you</u> matter. We matter. Our sense of humanity matters more than ever to tap into because our institutions, or the parts of our institutions based on paradigms we haven't needed to have the time to question, are being tested and sometimes eroded. I said I don't have an answer; I have a vibe. For education to be human, <u>we</u> need to be human. In 2020 we reckoned with <u>how</u> we learn, amid the exponential influence of a biological force we had yet to understand.

Now we reckon in 2026, driven in ~~the~~ exponential influence ~~by~~ a technological force we don't completely understand, with <u>why</u> we learn.

In both cases, fission. Some people took from the Covid years a preference for non-interactive learning and shaped their directions that way. Others realized just how much they craved what the pandemic had made difficult and returned to in-person learning knowing what they were about, possibly engaging MORE with community and hands-on than they would have if 2020 hadn't happened the way it did.
Some people don't ever want to go to lecture — can't really blame them. Some people go out of their way to.

But in 2026, we're sort of confronted with the big question at last, why learn? Yes, how, but also WHY? Why school? Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Schools that adapt to this, rather than policing it, schools that meet students where they are — and students that meet school where they are — these will persist in the era we're in. But they don't <u>need</u> to persist; nothing is supposed to be interesting. It's really schools that <u>want</u> to meet students where they are and students that <u>want</u> to meet school where they are. The pandemic highlighted, revealed, those who wanted to teach for the sake of connection and those for whom it was more transactional —

could this be the same now? Ask ourselves, why do we want to learn things? In a vacuum, would we want to? Why do we want to teach things?

Because either way a computer will do it all.

There is the case for prevention of atrophy — that the discomfort of struggling with something is, if circuitous, productive. Even if it is slower than an electrical impulse, it is stronger. And you may want that even if a priest problem won't inform your day-to-day. You want to be strong. And maybe, as MIT and its students are figuring things out, that becomes what you want to get out of MIT. A sort of gym for your mind. Maybe for vanity, maybe for strength, maybe to avoid poor health later, one exercises.

You're not here because a computer can't do 18.02, you're here because <u>you</u> <u>want</u> to do 18.02.

Tate Wilhelm told me that. Perhaps this is the litmus test, and indeed the whole vibe:

"I'm not doing ⟨x⟩ because a computer can't do it, I'm here because <u>I</u> <u>want</u> to do ⟨x⟩."

Because nothing is supposed to be obvious, nothing is supposed to be interesting,

and Computers are going to be able to do everything,
but we have each other and there is no
such thing as a stupid question as we figure
out WHY we want to do something.

And as we become more introspective about what we
DON'T want to do, we may find that
we are returning to our roots, coexisting
with AI but connecting deeply with each other
in community about what we Want to do.

I think that at ESG there is hope that this vibe
is natural to the experience. As of late, the Infinite
is sad and empty and everyone's walking Phone-in-hand
and not looking at each other. But I come up to the
Sixth floor, the lounge and the Corner and I could be
convinced we were living in ANY year. Somehow
this place feels more like home than it ever did.
It's starting to feel like I'm writing this for my students,
who are at the confluence of all these

evolving educational, political, and social reckonings that form our grand philosophical "party" we're all having.

Hi. I think where this is headed is a paradigm shift that won't preserve everybody — students, teachers, everyone in between. Not everyone is going to want to go to college or go to school, and that's okay; it may even be better because some people have been doing it without actually thinking of <u>why</u> they're doing it in the first place.

Nothing is supposed to be obvious, after all. Those moments of space heater despondency get countered when I ask "what gives me life?" What is my superpower — things I could do in a vacuum? I know that I want to work with people, I want to make music, I like learning things, building random ways to mess with people and turn TVs off, I love to teach. That's enough for me, but it may not be enough for you or a whole bunch of people — and THAT'S the bit, the beautiful thing is nothing is supposed to be interesting. It's not pretending that we need to keep people doing the same things as before,

in lockstep with unjustified traditions of man-made systems that are "how we've always done it."

In 1969, E/G was founded to break the mold because people found freshman year daunting and depressing — Precisely by conversations like the one happening up here today. The result was a community of people who actually wanted to be there they were and wanted to shape it, to make it better.

Turn the crank, pull the chain, out comes the little brown choo-choo train — you can plug in your work to a computer, an input becomes an output, and maybe out comes an M.I.T. degree, BUT YOU'RE GOING TO GET ONE ANYWAY, if you want one. I don't really worry about any of you, so you might as well have fun. If you want to be here, let's work out together.

In the coming months everyone is going to put out an AI policy and it may seem too institutional.

I feel, like .... like a duty to put something that feels — to me — balanced in front of students and says ... we also don't know. And I can't lock you in a house and say "this is wholesome, this is good for you." We've all sorting it out. My employment does not guarantee my relevance.