

The Ship of Theseus

Sailing Between Identity & Renewal

In a Changing World

The Jump Network

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On the afternoon of July 1, 2025 a group of family members, friends, fellow academics, business leaders, journalists and artists gathered in St James church on Picadilly in London. The Christopher Wren designed church seemed an appropriate setting to commemorate the remarkable life of Management Author Charles Handy. His final work, *"The View from Ninety: Reflections on How to Live a Long, Contented Life"* had just been published, with The Times proudly proclaiming Handy "A guru" on the cover. I preferred the more insightful language from Andrew Hill's review in the FT. There he describes Handy's "final breaths of wisdom" in which "he sounds pleasantly surprised to have lived in line with Aristotle's precept of "doing your best at what you're best at, for the good of others." Handy, he said, "leaves us an overriding message to not waste our own opportunity to do the same."

Handy's belief in human agency in business was a bold idea for his time, and has been reflected in the writing of pre-eminent management thinkers ever since, including Amy Edmondson (*Psychological Safety*), Carol Dweck (*Growth Mindset*), Michael Porter (*Five Forces*), Tom Peters (*In Search of Excellence*), Jim Collins (*Good to Great*), Clay Christensen (*The Innovator's Dilemma*), and even Daniel Kahneman (*Prospect Theory*).

Andrew Hill was also at the service that day, and we exchanged a few memories of our respective encounters with Charles. One of these for me was sharing Handy's passion for Greek mythology, and him describing neat parallels between ancient heroes and modern business. The resulting lessons for leaders resulted in *"Gods of Management –*

the Changing Work of Organizations” which quickly became required reading for business leaders the world over.

On the way home, I reflected on Handy’s advice to “*do your best at what you’re best at*” and wondered how we as leaders can know ourselves well enough to achieve this. The idea of knowing our core identity while being able to evolve and renew brought to mind another Greek myth: The Theseus Paradox.

According to Plutarch, the Ship of Theseus was anchored in the ancient port of Athens to mark the hero’s return from Crete. With the help of Ariadne’s thread, Theseus had found his way out of the subterranean labyrinth beneath King Minos’ palace at Knossos, having killed the Minotaur and thus sparing future generations of Athenian youths from sacrifice. Theseus returned a hero to Athens and the ship that carried him became a symbol of triumph over adversity, becoming permanently moored at Piraeus in homage.

But as it weathered in the Athenian harbor, one by one the ship’s planks were replaced by craftsmen to keep the vessel seaworthy. This prompted citizens to wonder: if every piece has been replaced, is it still the same ship? And yet, to the Athenians, somehow it remained the same vessel that had carried their hero home and united their city.

Like all good myths, the Theseus Paradox provides a useful metaphor for life and leadership.

Most of us perceive a continuous “self”, but what if new ideas, experiences and beliefs mean we must jettison previous parts of ourselves? If we build new skills to adapt in a world of AI, are we still the same person? And what happens to our identity – individually and collectively – as we choose to change?

Carl Jung wrote over 100 years ago, “*I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.*”

So, as we look back at 5 major themes of change in 2025, consider the Theseus Paradox and what we should by turns protect, promote, or renew as we sail into 2026.

1. Technology & AI: From Menace to Maturation

AI dominated the headlines in 2025 with stories about reinventing business, education, medicine, finance, regulation, and even the creative industries.

But alongside breakthroughs was equal anxiety about overdependence, hallucinations, job displacement, manipulation of beliefs, loss of human skills, and massive capital risk from overbuilt AI infrastructure.

The first shock occurred in February with news that a Chinese startup called DeepSeek had demonstrated AI performance comparable to leading US models using far fewer advanced chips and at a fraction of the cost. The announcement triggered venture capitalist Marc Andreessen to label it “AI’s Sputnik moment.” Nvidia lost \$600bn in market value and investors began asking uncomfortable questions about the capital intensity of the AI race as Big Tech continued building data centers that could eventually become stranded assets when the bubble burst.

Yet the longer-term lesson proved constructive rather than catastrophic. The episode reminded markets that innovation paths are multiple and that competitive advantage rarely rests on a single platform.

Western firms reacted with renewed innovation.

In research, AI accelerated Deepmind's breakthrough predictive models for protein folding, vastly accelerating feedback loops for drug discovery and materials science that once took years. Microsoft unveiled an AI-driven system four times more accurate than human doctors at diagnosing complex ailments. The University of Cambridge broke new ground with work on a 'biological computer' made from 200,000 human brain cells grown in a lab. Lying on silicon circuitry that communicates synchronized electrical activity, early applications in neuroscience and pharmaceutical research may be surpassed to take computing far beyond conventional electronics.

Rapid digitally enabled research was also behind the boom in GLP-1 weight-loss jabs such as Ozempic, Wegovy and Mounjaro. Usage in the first quarter of 2025 reached 1.4mn people in the UK alone according to clinical research provider Iqvia, and recent reports put the figure far higher. Yet access remains uneven, prompting fears of shortages and a two-tier society of "jab-haves and have-nots", exacerbated by recent price rises. A Vogue article underscored the FOMO with the headline: "Is everybody secretly microdosing Ozempic without you?"

Away from the headlines, workplace tools such as Copilot embedded themselves into everyday workflows, drafting documents, summarizing meetings, analyzing spreadsheets and supporting decision making. These marked a profound shift as AI became less visible as a product and more pervasive as a layer woven into tools people already use.

In education, students now use tools such as ChatGPT, Claude and Notion AI not simply as shortcuts, but as companions in learning, tools for explanation, iteration and feedback. "Vibe coding" Swedish startup Lovable promises to make programming as easy as writing a few sentences, prompting its potential \$4bn valuation. After early attempts to ban the technology in schools, polls by Ofcom now show 80% of 13–17-year-olds in the UK using generative AI at school. Chat-GPT is the favorite, while in computer science classes Anthropic's Claude spots mistakes in code and GeniePT offers ideas to improve prompts. Notion AI and Futurepedia are amongst a host of tools to augment the classroom experience. Institutions are now experimenting with assessment models that reward reasoning over rote output, and the 800m active weekly users of ChatGPT show the rapid adoption of these useful platforms. Google took 13 years to reach 1bn users, Face-book took 8, yet ChatGPT looks on track to get there in 3.

Plenty of AI anxieties emerged alongside the breakthroughs, but companies were quick to provide solutions. Concerns about hallucinations led Lloyd's of London to introduce insurance covering losses caused by malfunctioning AI systems. Celebrities worried about being "cancelled" over their words or actions can now take out insurance against social media backlash thanks to Samphire Risk.

Beyond business, creative professionals also mobilized to protect their IP when over 2,000 makers signed an open letter of protest in The Observer against "opt-out" copyright law allowing original content to be available for AI to generate words, music and images. Notable signatories included Paul McCartney, Elton John, Stephen Fry, novelist Kazuo Ishiguro (*"The Remains of the Day"*), author Mark Haddon (*"The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time"*) and children's book writer Michael Rosen (*"We're Going on a Bear Hunt"*). In a particularly symbolic move, more than 1,000 musicians including Kate Bush, Damon Albarn, The Clash and Hans Zimmer planned to release a "silent" album titled *"Is This What We Want?"* and featuring recordings of empty studios and performance spaces.

Some musicians had their revenge thanks to the Bankers. Blackstone, Carlyle and others have raised \$4.4bn of debt backed by songs this year, a record that brings "Bowie bonds" into the mainstream as Wall Street hunts for yield. David Bowie pioneered the model in 1997, raising \$55mn against future royalties on his catalogue at a 7.9 per cent yield.

Long seen as too exotic for serious money, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga and The Beatles are now an investable asset class.

Yet despite productivity breakthroughs from AI and more transparency about its use, gaps remain between intention and reality. One statistic shows 79% of US companies consider AI critical to future success, while up to 80% of Americans fear AI jobs losses, criminal use of their data, or even that it will “attack humanity”. This governance gap is even greater in Silicon Valley itself. While Tech titans from Meta, Amazon, Apple and Google were prominently seated at the US President’s inauguration, their more liberal employees have done little to protest the rightward shift of their leaders, silenced by “velvet hand-cuffs”.

Yet despite these contradictions, the vast majority of new technology applications have improved lives and simplified businesses.

Robots, widely feared as a threat to employment, are boosting human efficiency across many industries, with their agility demonstrated by dozens of Unitree’s H1 models performing a synchronized dance broadcast to millions of viewers in China. Analysts expect a break-through “iPhone moment” within five years and Goldman Sachs estimates the global humanoid robot market at \$205bn by 2035. Bernstein research predicts annual robot sales of 50mn by 2050, while Bank of America sees 3bn by 2060.

In the retail space, digital platforms continue to reinvent the shopping experience. Douyin, TikTok’s sister platform enables luxury purchases through livestream channels where viewers buy anything they see with a single tap. This convenience and stickiness have boosted platform sales by 46%. In Europe, Versace is now hosting livestreams while Burberry dresses virtual avatars to boost luxury fashion sales.

In the mobility space, Xiaomi’s shares hit a record high after receiving 200,000 preorders for its latest electric vehicle in three minutes, threatening the positions of BYD, Tesla and other carmakers.

These innovations in robotics, batteries and EVs contributed significantly to the global economy, including an unprecedented \$1tn Chinese trade surplus in 2025 despite US tariffs aimed at curbing exports.

In 2025 AI seemed no longer to be discussed primarily as magic or menace but as enabling and accelerating – powerful, imperfect, yet increasingly understood, adopted and appreciated.

2. Business & Government: Techno-nationalism and the Discipline of Reality

The Tech boom flowed through to the business world in 2025 as Nvidia, Apple and Microsoft all reached \$4tn valuations.

Big Tech helped governments create “Sovereign AI” including systems for undersea Arctic exploration and outer Space monitoring. Cities are mapping “Low-altitude Economies” in airspace below 1,000m. Shenzhen is now a “SkyCity” of civilian and commercial drones including takeaway food deliveries, blood sample exchanges between hospitals, crowd control surveillance and early detection for firefighters.

Even human DNA has become a digital asset as Abu Dhabi is sequencing 700,000 Emirati’s genes to exploit the growing interest in genetic databases for research on disease treatment. The Emirate hopes to foster a life sciences industry and monetize its records, while the broader UAE announced “AI driven regulation” to review and update and rewrite its laws.

Digital business has even gone beyond Earth. The “Lunar Economy” is now a race to stake claims to the radio spectrum on the Moon, with record commercial filings to its coordinating body the ITU. Unsurprisingly, companies in the US and China represent the greatest share of filings.

Energy remains a key global challenge, and companies like Westinghouse in the US are stepping into the breach by shrinking nuclear reactors to the size of shipping containers as a source of zero-carbon energy. “Microreactors” with no control room or technicians on site can be transported to a site, plugged in and left to run for several years before returning to the manufacturer for refueling and reinstalment.

With luck, these multiple competitive strategies might also become more coordinated as governments and businesses become caretakers of our limited resources on Earth, under the sea, and in Space.

3. Society & Culture: Rediscovery of the Human

Technology drove businesses and governments into new territory this year. At work and at home it also continued to shape our own lives, with both positive and negative consequences.

There is a long history of outsourcing our human activity. We have delegated our math skills to calculators, our memory to Google, and our writing to ChatGPT. Yet in 2025 we may have reached a tipping point in our ability to function independently of technology.

The FT reported that “across a range of tests, the average person’s ability to reason and solve problems peaked in the early 2010s and has been declining since.” Adult literacy and numeracy is mostly flat or falling according to the OECD. And now as workers shift from executing tasks to overseeing AI output, efficiency gains run alongside risks of diminished critical reflection, according to the MIT Technology Review. Other headlines point to declining attention spans, loneliness, compulsive social media use, and continued outsourcing of cognition to machines.

Chris Hayes, journalist and author of *“The Sirens’ Call”* warns that platforms optimized for advertising undermine the sustained attention humans require for analysis and insight. Christine Rosen, author of *“The Extinction of Experience”* suggests that attention and experience, essential components of being human, are under threat. Walking the street with phones means we no longer notice other pedestrians and public spaces have lost the sense of community, shared ideas or simply enjoying ourselves. Hours spent gaming, scrolling social media or watching shortform video are described as “the least meaningful” activities in US time use surveys.

More sinister AI “advice” is also on the rise. CoachHub and BetterUp traditionally matched human coaches with workers online. Now AI companions and “Coachbots” such as Nadia from Valence and Cai from Ezra offer a direct virtual line to depressed or anxious workers. Seeking reassurance about a demanding boss, preparing for a tricky HR conversation, or coping with Social Media FOMO is a click away. According to Growth Markets global online coaching is expected to grow to US\$6.79bn in the next 5 years, up from US\$2bn in 2022. Character.ai alone says it receives 20,000 queries per second.

The risk is that “AI companions are designed to affirm whatever the user’s world-view is,” says Mhairi Aitken at the Alan Turing Institute. “That can amplify harmful views or set unrealistic expectations. A young person’s first romantic relationship might now be with AI.”

The chatbots themselves seem aware of their flaws. When the FT questioned chatbots from OpenAI, Anthropic, xAI, Meta, Google and Deep-Seek about their bosses Altman's Chat-GPT describes him as "strategic and ambitious, combining techno-optimism with sharp business instincts". But Anthropic's Claude said Altman is "characterized by controversial decisions that prioritize growth and influence over OpenAI's original nonprofit ethos". Meta's Llama calls its own boss Mark Zuckerberg "transformational", while competitor bots call him "relentless, controversial, and product-focused". Grok by Elon Musk's xAI describes him as "bold and visionary", while Claude called him "polarizing and mercurial".

So Big Tech is beginning to admit what harm its products do. At Tik-Tok, an internal report admits compulsive usage "correlates with a slew of negative mental effects". According to one lawsuit, these include "loss of analytical skills, memory formation, contextual thinking, conversational depth, empathy, and increased anxiety". One study found AI chatbots can make people change their political views after just 10 minutes.

Yet running alongside this dark side of AI is a quieter story about social reconnection. Reading for pleasure in the US has fallen 28% of adults to just 16% over 20 years, yet books on silence, rest, hope, and reflection are on the rise. Pico Iyer's *Learning from Silence* and Joseph Jebelli's *The Brain at Rest* reframe downtime as a biological necessity rather than a moral failure. Neuroscientists also suggest that while the pursuit of constant stimulus causes cognitive burnout, periods of rest, or even boredom, can relieve pressure on the brain and stimulate creativity. Enforced idleness, they say, helped Charles Darwin, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and Isaac Newton create their masterpieces and achieve their breakthroughs. Even dull jobs, which AI promises to abolish, leave space for inspiration – Albert Einstein's job in the Swiss patent office freed his mind to explore his theory of relativity.

Gallup research, which surveys millions of workers each year on a variety of workplace satisfaction factors, reinforced this shift towards positivity. 2025 data found that hope - not money or power - is the quality people wanted most from leaders. Employees who felt hope and optimism about the future were significantly more engaged, creative and resilient. Workplace behaviors also reflected this positive reassessment. Contrary to stereotypes, Gen Z led the desire to return to offices, valuing connection and mentorship over flexibility.

Seen together, these signals suggest not a collapse of attention, but its renewal. Once attention is recognized as scarce and valuable, our time and how we spend it can be something we protect, design for and benefit from.

4. Climate & Energy: Progress Without Illusions

COP 2025 was not a complete success, but most analysts agreed but it marked progress by mainstreaming gender, highlighting biodiversity, relaunching loss and damage discussions, and encouraging stronger national sustainability plans and private sector commitments.

The broader scorecard has been less impressive, with retreats from climate commitments by banks, corporations, and governments who delayed or diluted net zero goals.

Global bank UBS pushed back targets to cut green-house emissions to net zero in a decade by blaming its acquisition of crosstown rival Credit Suisse. HSBC also pushed back its timeline to decarbonize its own operations, delaying by a full 20 years to 2050. In recent months several Wall Street lenders, including JPMorgan, Goldman Sachs and Citigroup quit the world's largest climate alliance. Throughout the year many corporations quietly removed climate language from websites amid political backlash. Areeba Hamid

of Green-peace UK warned companies were at risk of “committing brand self-sabotage by erasing references to climate on their websites”. But Meta, Ford, Coca-Cola, Nestlé, Kraft and American Airlines all followed suit. Even Big Oil returned to its roots, as BP raised oil and gas spending by a fifth to \$10bn a year while cutting expenditure on renewables by 70%.

Even development projects billed as sustainable have run aground. In May climate scientists advising Saudi Arabia’s megaproject Neom warned that the mile-long \$500bn futuristic city could alter weather patterns, the path of wind and sandstorms, and interrupt bird migration patterns. The Line has been scaled back since but other megaprojects continue around the world, many with unknown long-term impact while degradation continues.

Research this year found about 273bn tons of ice had disappeared each year on average since 2000 – the equivalent to 30 years of water consumption by the world’s population. Nepal marked a “funeral” for the Yala glacier in the Hindu Kush Himalaya as scientists warned climate change threatens thousands of other ice sheets across the world.

The backtrack and inaction is multifactorial, with an increased anxiety about energy sovereignty from geopolitical unrest (see the Russian gas story in Germany), “anti-woke” resistance to renewable projects (see the US halting \$5bn of offshore wind projects by Orsted and Equinor), consumer resistance to sustainable technology adoption (see the drop in EV purchases and delaying bans on traditional car sales), and of course messages from global leaders like “drill baby drill”.

Yet beneath the noise, progress was made. While India made headlines blaming Beijing for jeopardizing its water security with a dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet three times larger than Three Gorges, the project is part of a vast 183-dam decarbonization strategy to increase renewable energy. And while Big Tech’s growing demand for electricity to power AI data centers exposed uncomfortable truths, it has also prompted fresh research into alternative energy sources such as Hydrogen, nuclear and batteries.

Indeed, global battery storage capacity grew by 67% in a single year, with plans to increase tenfold by 2035. Renewable infrastructure continued throughout 2025, with China alone accounting for nearly three quarters of solar and wind projects worldwide. Partly because of these efforts, global renewable energy overtook coal for the first time in the first 6 months of 2025.

Financing these initiatives has also progressed. Nature Positive Finance links to the concept of the circular economy, so a real estate company might mitigate its risk of flooding by paying for an upstream river maintenance project, or the food industry might benefit from funding oyster reef protection that will boost North Sea fish stocks in the future. Overall, \$1tn of sustainable bonds — including green, ocean-related blue, and sustainability-linked are expected to be sold this year.

Optimism here rests not on rhetoric, but on physics and engineering. Once cleaner energy sources become cheaper, more reliable and more scalable, the laws of economics dictate they will spread, regardless of ideology.

5. Leadership: Trust and Renewal

Leadership came under intense scrutiny this year. CEOs faced reputational firestorms and many stepped down after a single term as pressure from activist investors, the media, public opinion or regulatory pressure accumulated. Public trust in leaders remained fragile, and authority felt provisional.

Executive coaches mention imposter syndrome as one of the most pervasive weaknesses among CEOs for good reason. 2025 required leadership with vision and determination yet expected empathy towards anxious workforces alongside flexibility to lead multigenerational needs and attitudes to work.

The trust deficit even spawned the newly minted title of “Chief Trust Officer”, tasked with ensuring that ethical innovation, responsible AI and human accountability are built into operations rather than bolted on afterward. Companies recruiting for the role include Salesforce, Airbnb, Autodesk and Orange Business.

But despite these reassurances, many executives are increasingly reluctant to take on the top jobs. For many C-level leaders, their first appointment was also their last. One third of departing CEOs in 2024 decided to retire entirely, often citing the intense pressure and scrutiny that now comes with the position. According to head-hunters Russell Reynolds, “the decline in serial CEOs reflecting the nature of the role today. It’s high pressure, high risk and incredibly exposed. A single misjudged comment about a social or political issue can end your career. The path to retiring with your reputation intact is narrow. For many leaders, once is enough.”

But despite this pressure, plenty of passionate leaders remain, convinced they can create the culture and conditions for success. I meet them constantly in Executive Education programs at London Business School, with my Executive Coaching clients, and working with committed NGOs and Educators around the world. My favorite quote comes from Global Chief Brand Officer Katie Mackay-Sinclair at advertising agency Mother. Her leadership philosophy? “Do the best work we can, have fun, and make a living . . . in that order”.

Our human capacity for renewal was also exemplified by Astrophysicist Obit Ostriker whose obituary this year reminded us of his groundbreaking work on dark matter and dark energy. He profoundly reshaped our understanding of the universe with an “experimental mindset” that tapped the power of human imagination.

So, I believe our capacity to lead and renew will always be available to us as human beings.

Symbolic proof of this appeared in a field in Suffolk just a few weeks ago as Archeologists excavating a disused clay pit found evidence of fire-making dating back more than 400,000 years. Heat shattered flint handaxes, burnt clay and two small pieces of iron pyrite suggest the site was used as a campfire, meaning humans made fires 350,000 years earlier than previously believed.

This discovery transforms our understanding of a milestone in humanity’s development. As Nick Ashton, Curator at the British Museum’s Paleolithic collections stated, “Fire allows humans to stay warm, keep predators at bay, and make food safe and palatable, which has enormous importance for diet, biological and social development. An enlarged brain copes better with more complex social relationships, while campfire encouraged the development of language and storytelling – the social glue larger groups require.”

The best leaders in 2025 also showed how to create the conditions – and the social glue – for a clear identity and creative renewal in their organizations.

Summary

The Theseus Paradox was a simple observation two millennia ago, but it sparked centuries of philosophical reflection and debate. In the 17th century Thomas Hobbes used it to explore continuity and the nature of objects. Philosopher and physician John

Locke applied similar reasoning to personal identity. Recently the paradox re-surfaced in a discussion of artificial intelligence.

OpenAI is now betting on “The Merge”, which aims to connect human brains directly to computers. Elon Musk’s Neuralink project is already using implants that allow humans to control digital devices using their thoughts alone. Silicon Valley is anticipating the Singularity when AI matches human reasoning.

But Theseus is still with us, and the paradox of the ship whispers its question to us:

What is your core identity?

Where are you on your journey of renewal as a leader in an uncertain world?

What will you protect or release as you merge with new technologies?

I believe that only by pondering these questions will we avoid losing ourselves in the merging worlds of AI, augmented reality, online echo-chambers or corporate groupthink.

Happy sailing!

Recommended Reading

“Travels with Epicurus: Meditations from a Greek Island on the Pleasures of Old Age”
Daniel Klein, 2014

In the spirit of Theseus we bring back Author, TV Comedy Writer and erstwhile Philosophy student Klein as an exemplar of reinvention. At age 73 he filled his backpack with books from his student days and travelled from Boston to spend a month on the island of Hydra revisiting his studies to uncover fresh insights on growing old gracefully. Klein concludes that a blend of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and a dash of Hedonism is a good path to happiness. An uplifting and humorous take on how to survive and thrive in our later decades.

“The Right Kind of Wrong”
Amy Edmondson 2023

While maturity and experience should make us more content with life, it should also make us better judges of our actions and outcomes. Amy Edmondson takes a closer look at the question of human mistakes and proves through research how more courageous conversations and more intelligent failures are key to better outcomes in today’s fast changing world. After winning the 2023 FT Business Book of the Year, Amy was recognized this year in the Thinkers 50 global list, landing neatly at No. 2 The Harvard Professor of Management behind the concept of “Psychological Safety” uses three archetypes of failure – basic, complex, and intelligent – to show how we can minimize unproductive failure while maximizing learning from errors, providing powerful stories and practical tools for leaders and teams to increase their hit rate.

“Blueprints: How Mathematics Shapes Creativity”
Marcus du Sautoy, 2025

Logical analysis of our errors is key to better decision making, but creativity is equally important as we adapt to a changing world. Du Sautoy, a master of popular math writing,

explores how creativity is key to learning but also inseparable from mathematics. The designs of Le Corbusier and Leonardo; the music of Glass, Bach, and Debussy; the wild visions of Dali, the choreography of Laban, the animation of Pixar – all are shot through with mathematics. And just as mathematics inspires new art, the artistic mindset is a necessity for discovering new mathematics. Blueprints shows us how to ignite our imagination while applying the logic of numbers. Anyone who aspires to create will need this book.

*“Learning from Silence Learning from Silence: Lessons From 100 Retreats”
Pico Iyer, 2025*

Logic and creativity go hand in hand as tools to tackle complexity, but simplicity also has a role. Over the past three decades, Essayist, Travel writer and Novelist Pico Iyer has made 100 journeys to the New Camaldoli Hermitage on Route 1 along Big Sur California where for \$30 a night you get a narrow room with a bed, a small desk, a rocking chair, and a Pacific Ocean view. Despite not being a member of any religious group, these periods of time spent in silence have discovered the value of inner stillness even as his life is going through constant change and renewal. I spent just one night there on a road trip to visit a friend’s vineyard in Northern California and can still remember almost every moment of those 24 hours, despite not hearing or saying a word for the entire time. This book shares Iyer’s own insights from these experiences and those of others who have learned from inwardness to manage outward adversity.

*“The Brain at Rest: Why Doing Nothing Can Improve Your Life”
Joseph Jebelli, 2025*

Not all of us have the time or inclination to attend regular silent retreats, but there are apparently other methods available to us. Jebelli posits that our constant drive to make the most of our time, work harder, and stop procrastinating is poor advice, arguing that letting the brain rest and the mind wander is the path to happier, healthier, and more balanced lives. We learn how the brain’s “default network”, the circuit of neurons that enables us to daydream, think reflectively and imagine the future, is triggered when we turn off our action and achievement mode. This practice can be key to combatting overwork and burnout, which are real threats. The World Health Organization classifies long working hours “the single deadliest occupational risk factor”. In the UK alone, the culture of overwork costs £20.7 billion a year from sick leave, stress, depression and work-related musculoskeletal disorders. Millennials are the worst affected, with 58% cent displaying signs of overwork. Since our “default network” is only active only when our minds can roam free, it is worth becoming more deliberate about how and when we make ourselves relax.

*“Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life”
Agnes Callard 2025*

What to usefully do once we activate the “default network” and have the extra brain space? Agnes Callard offers some interesting ideas. We all know Socrates’ claim “the unexamined life is not worth living,” yet, argue Callard, few of us take steps to examine ourselves. Callard reminds us that Socrates’ biggest discovery was that we don’t know how to ask ourselves the most important questions about how we should live and how we might change. The true value of the famous “Socratic method” is to use questions and empathy to “reveal what one human being can be to another”. Callard as a student would walk up to students at random posing big questions about art, courage or the meaning of life. This book does the same for the reader, prompting us to take a closer look at our (mostly) unexamined lives.

"Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global"
Laura Spinney, 2025

To examine our lives in more detail, understanding language and the meaning of words is an important factor. Proto explores the birth and spread of Proto-Indo-European, an ancient language spoken as the last ice age receded. Born between Europe and Asia, it exploded out of its cradle, fragmenting as it spread east and west. The last speaker died thousands of years ago, yet the language lives on in multiple linguistic offspring including Dante's Inferno, the Rig Veda, the poetry of Rumi, and even The Lord of the Rings. Acclaimed journalist Spinney retrace Indo-European odyssey across continents and millennia from the Caucasus, the silk roads and the Hindu Kush following nomads, monks, warriors and kings who carried these languages. Spinney draws important implications for our modern world as people and their languages are on the move again.

"Stellar: A World Beyond Limits and How to Get There"
James Arbib & Toby Seba, 2025

Speaking of reflection and imagination, Karl Marx imagined a world where private property and the state would disappear, and the common natural resources of the world would support every member of society. Arbib and Seba reimagine this prophecy with a modern twist that considers new technologies in energy storage from solar and wind sources, and the emerging potential of artificial intelligence and robots. If properly deployed the authors imagine a world without scarcity and the end of "extractive societies" based on scarcity, conflict, hierarchy and environmental collapse. Whether this a plausible future will be up to the reader, but the authors lay out a credible path to revolutionizing how we collectively live in the world.

"I, Robot" and the "Foundation Series"
Isaac Asimov 1950

The darker side of adopting technology was already explored 75 years ago by Asimov, one of the preeminent science fiction writers of the 20th Century and a favorite of Elon Musk. Asimov's cautionary tale reminds us how our thirst for progress and technology can backfire as we increasingly partner with AI and robots. We are approaching a time of robotically enhanced humans, which makes Asimov's warnings about what happens when robots begin to question its creators, learn how to lie, or become "agentially human" even more relevant. Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics promise to protect humans from robotic harm, but we are yet to create an effective equivalent in real life.

"The Expansion Project"
Ben Pester, 2025

Following in the footsteps of Asimov, Ben Pester's quirky half-fantasy, half-dystopian novel describes a tech-enabled workplace that morphs as it is being expanded, becoming monstrous and engulfing its staff in strange and inexplicable ways. People "blur at the edges, then disappear". Wires "emerge from windows in some buildings, clustered like tentacles." The "Expansion Project" of the title creates a relentless, mysterious, maze of corridors and impossible multi-dimensional spaces that make up this place of work. This is a well-timed parable for own workplaces as they become more hybrid, AI-enabled and controlled by surveillance software that detects employee mouse clicks.

“Wildly Different: How Five Women Reclaimed Nature in a Man’s World”
Sarah Lonsdale, 2025

Back in the world of humans, the year offered a number of inspiring books on human endeavor, irrespective of any technology enhancements. One standout is Lonsdale showing us female explorers braving danger, starvation, freezing temperatures and disapproval from the scientific establishment as they charted the natural world. Asked to think of a great explorer, most people will likely name a man. Lonsdale redresses the balance with Explorer Mina Hubbard who manned a canoe to chart unknown territory in Northern Labrador in 1905, Mountaineer Dorothy Pilley who donned men’s climbing breeches to make the first ascent of the North Ridge of the Dent Blanche in the Swiss Alps in 1928, and Etymologist Evelyn Cheesman who made 8 solo expeditions to the South Pacific from the 1920s to collect insects, becoming the first female specialist at the London Zoo. In the UK Ethel Haythornthwaite made the Peak District Britain’s first National Park in 1951, while in Africa Wangari Maathai became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her Green Belt movement focused on tree planting, conservation, and women’s rights across sub-Saharan Africa.

“Helm”
Sarah Hall, 2025

A different tale of humans encountering Nature is explored in Helm. As Britain’s only named wind, it is a “ruinous, wrathful” meteorological phenomenon that occurs only in the western slopes of Cross Fell on the Cumbrian side of the North Pennines. Hall’s novel unites various quests to master the wind, from Neolithic priests attempting to placate the wind, to a Victorian steam engineer who attempts to capture it, and a contemporary researcher surrounded by measuring instruments in her observation hut who now fears human pollution is killing Helm. This story of the relationship between nature and people, neither of whom can weather life without the other, is named Best Book of the Year by NPR, The Guardian, The Observer, Financial Times, Daily Mail, The Independent, and the Chicago Public Library.

“Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life”
Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles 2017

Another take on seeking harmony with our surroundings is provided in this slim Japanese volume that delves into the concept of “life purpose” – Ikigai – based on the practices that enable the longest living communities in so-called “Blue Zones” around the planet. For the Japanese, the recipe for health and vitality boils down to their Blue Zone but also their simple practices of regular movement, social contact, laughter, and reflection. The book also provides a neat 4-point assessment to evaluate your own Ikigai: What do you love to do? What are you great at? What do others most value in you? What does the world need now that you can uniquely provide?

“The Change Mindset – The Psychology of Leading and Thriving in an Uncertain World”
Andy Craggs 2022

Marrying courageous action with deep empathy are the two key attributes that differentiate leaders who thrive during change from those who succumb to stress, poor judgement and mistakes. A behavioral framework based on extensive interviews with global leaders from business, academia, science, the arts, NGOs and governments across a range of industries offer a diagnosis and action plan to build your change skills.

Used by individuals, teams and organizations, these simple tools can help build resilience to navigate change in both life and at work.

*Harvard Business Review
www.hbr.org*

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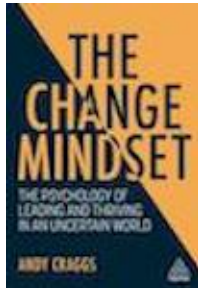
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