An Open Letter to the Parents of Today's Young Adults

If you're like me, you spend a lot of time thinking about your kids.

Not just about where they'll work or how much money they'll make, but about something much more important.

Will they be happy?

Will they be confident?

Will they find their place in the world?

Will they become satisfied adults?

Those questions feel especially important right now because our children are coming of age during a remarkable moment in history. Artificial intelligence is advancing rapidly. Entire industries are talking about transformation, disruption, and automation. Every day seems to bring another prediction about how work, education, and society are about to change.

As parents, it's natural to wonder what all of this means for the next generation.

After spending a great deal of time thinking about this, I've come to a surprisingly simple conclusion.

The most important thing we can help our children develop may not be technical skills at all.

It may be the ability to think in systems.

Let me explain.

When parents imagine a successful future for their children, they rarely start with job titles. They don't dream about spreadsheets, software platforms, or organizational charts. What they really want is something deeper. They want their children to become capable, confident, connected, and satisfied adults.

The challenge is that satisfaction doesn't simply appear one day.

It grows from contribution.

People feel satisfied when they know they matter. They feel satisfied when they can solve problems, help others, build things, improve things, and contribute to something larger than themselves.

Contribution, however, requires capability.

And capability comes from participation.

That sequence matters.

Young people become confident by doing things, not by watching other people do them. They develop identity by participating in the world around them, not by consuming endless streams of content about the world around them. In the wake of COVID and the isolation that social media accelerated, that distinction has never mattered more. They discover who they are by taking part in families, communities, organizations, projects, teams, businesses, and causes that require something from them.

In other words, satisfaction is often the result of a chain that begins with participation.

What does this have to do with artificial intelligence?

Everything.

For most of human history, people were limited not by their intelligence, but by their access to intelligence. They may have had curiosity, motivation, and ambition, but they lacked immediate access to the experience needed to move forward.

Today, that barrier is disappearing.

A young person with curiosity can learn skills that once required years of specialized instruction. They can explore complex subjects, build software, create businesses, design products, investigate ideas, and solve problems with a level of support that previous generations simply did not have.

That is why I believe the conversation about AI is often headed in the wrong direction.

The question is not whether our children will learn to use AI tools. They will.

The question is whether they will learn how to think.

More specifically, whether they will learn how to think about systems.

Systems thinking isn't about knowing everything before you begin. Think of a ship's captain — he didn't emerge from the womb knowing how to command a vessel. He stepped onto the ship, learned how the systems worked, understood how the pieces fit together, and eventually earned the right to steer it. AI has made that learning journey available to everyone. The ship is no longer reserved for a select few, but it still has no destination of its own. The young people who thrive will be the ones who step onto the bridge, use AI to learn the ship, and then steer it toward something that matters. That's systems thinking. And for the first time in history, almost anyone can learn to be a captain.

Because AI can increasingly help with the details. It can explain procedures, answer questions, provide examples, and accelerate learning. What it cannot do is understand what matters most in a person's life.

It cannot decide what kind of family someone wants to build.

It cannot decide what kind of business someone wants to create.

It cannot decide what kind of community someone wants to strengthen.

It cannot decide what kind of life someone wants to live.

Those decisions require people who understand systems.

They require people who can see how pieces fit together, how actions create consequences, how relationships influence outcomes, and how meaningful change actually happens.

The young adults who thrive in an AI-infused world will not necessarily be the ones who memorize the most tools. Those tools will continue to change.

The young adults who thrive will be the ones who understand systems well enough to use those tools in service of something meaningful.

That is why I find myself optimistic.

Our children are entering a world where intelligence and experience are becoming more accessible than ever before. If we can help them combine that access with systems-level thinking, they may become more capable than any generation before them.

Not because they know more facts.

Not because they work longer hours.

But because they can participate more meaningfully in the systems that shape their lives.

And when people participate, they develop capability. Capability builds confidence. Confidence encourages contribution. Contribution helps form identity. And identity is one of the foundations of a satisfying life.

As parents, that may be the opportunity in front of us.

Not simply teaching our children how to use the technologies of the future.

Teaching them how to think well enough to use those technologies to build a future worth living.