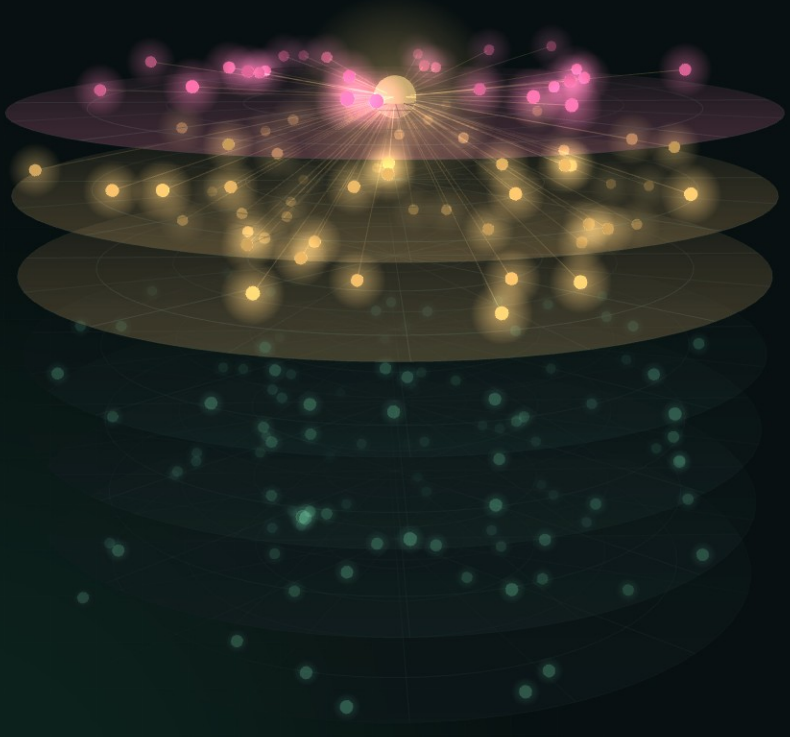
THE ATTENDER SERIES · BOOK FOUR

Higher *Order*

Why human attention only climbs, and the question that replaces "What do you do?"



JOHN RECTOR

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A Note on Book Four

This is the fourth book in the Attender Series.

The first, The Coming AI Subconscious, argued that artificial intelligence is an identity event, not just a job event. Attention leaves first. The world reorganizes second. The second, World War AI, was a novel set in Charleston about a woman whose life was built inside a layer of work that felt deeply human, until a machine began absorbing it. The third, The Attender, now in its second edition, drew two objects and a line between them. One object is the AI, and its name is delegate. The other object is you, and your name is attender.

That book named the human. This one asks what the name does to you once you carry it.

It began as a lecture I recorded on the morning of November 17, 2026. It was about twenty-six minutes long, and it kept circling one claim I had never put plainly before. Human attention only climbs. It does not go down. When the world carries something for us, we do not stop attending. We attend to something higher. And because that is true, the most important question you can ask a person is no longer the one we ask at every party.

The question we ask is, what do you do?

The question we should ask is, what are you attending to?

The rest of this book is an argument for that replacement. It is also an argument with myself, because the claim that attention only climbs is the kind of claim that sounds wonderful and breaks easily. I will tell you where I think it breaks. I will also tell you why I think the honest version is stronger than the one I said out loud that morning.

My delegate turned the lecture into the book. That is not a stunt. It is an audit. I spent twenty-six minutes of attention on this. Everything else was carried.

PROLOGUE

The Party Question

A PARTY, 1895

Someone asks the young woman by the window what she does. She says, I am a computer. Nobody laughs.

Imagine four parties, a long way apart in time.

At the first one, in 1895, a young woman tells you she is a computer. You are impressed. You ask which observatory she works for, because that is the likeliest answer, though it might be a government bureau or a bank. She goes to work every day and computes. She does arithmetic, by hand, for hours, carefully, and she is good at it.

At the second, in 1935, a man tells you he runs an elevator. You are interested. Those things frighten you a little. You ask how high he goes. He has stories about the forty-first floor and about the day the power failed, and you listen to every one.

At the third, in 2026, someone tells you she is a financial analyst at a large bank. People nod. That sounds serious. It sounds like a good life. Nobody asks what she actually spends her day on, which is mostly moving numbers around in a spreadsheet until the spreadsheet tells a particular story.

At the fourth party, a hundred years from now, nobody asks what you do.

That is not because people have stopped being curious. It is because the question has stopped meaning anything. The computer is gone as a job title. The elevator operator is gone as a job title. The financial analyst, in the sense of the person who moves the numbers, will be gone too. In each case the work did not vanish. It was absorbed. And in each case the people did not vanish either. Their attention went

somewhere else.

So at the fourth party, the question is different.

What are you attending to?

It is a better question now, too. It just sounds strange, because we have spent a few centuries confusing what a person is with the job a person holds. This book is about undoing that confusion, and about why the age of AI will undo it whether we help or not.

> *Nobody stops attending. The only question is what the attention is on.*

PART ONE

The Title That Does Not Move

The AI's name keeps changing. Yours was settled before it had a word.

CHAPTER ONE

The Only Proper Title

ANY MEETING, 2026

A slide reads Human in the Loop. Under it, a diagram of a person standing above a machine, holding a clipboard.

Here is the claim of this chapter, as plainly as I can make it. The only proper title for a human being in the age of AI is attender.

Not because it is pretty. Because it is accurate, and because every other title points your attention at the wrong thing.

Start with the AI, since its names are easier. It started out as the assistant. It became the agent. It is becoming the delegate. Later it will become something I can only call a form of talent. Not the talent, as if there were one, but talented the way a gifted colleague is talented. There will be an enormous number of talented human beings in the world, and the AI will be talented too. The difference between a delegate and talent is simple. You do not prompt talent much. It does what it does, because that is what talent means.

The AI's name will keep changing because the AI keeps changing. Each name describes a capability, and capabilities move.

Now the human. Right now most of the world positions the human the way an organization chart would. The supervisor. The principal, as in principal and agent. The manager. The one who is the boss over the delegate. Every one of those words assumes a hierarchy in which one party commands and the other complies. People object to that framing because it echoes master and servant, and they are right to be uneasy. But that is not my main objection.

My objection is that it is not useful. It puts your focus in the wrong place.

If you are the supervisor, your attention belongs on the thing you supervise. If you are the manager, your attention belongs on the thing you manage. Every one of those titles sends your attention back to the delegate. And the entire point of a delegate is that your attention no longer has to go there.

The word attender does the opposite. It does not tell you who the AI is. It tells you who you are, and the definition carries a question inside it. If you are the attender, you are always being asked: what are you attending to?

The attender is also the one who makes history. In the Reality Equation, the one whose reality it is, the one who acts and leaves artifacts behind, is the Actualizer. Consciousness does not manufacture the future. It manufactures history. The delegate can carry an enormous amount. It does not stand where you stand, at the point where a reality arrives and more than one action is still possible. That place is yours. Standing there, receiving what reaches you, acting on it, is what attending is.

So the human is the attender. The history maker. The Actualizer. Of the three, attender is the best word for daily use, because it reminds you, every time you hear it, of the one resource you are spending.

THE LINE

The AI’s name describes a capability and keeps changing. The human’s name describes a resource and does not. Attender.

NOTICE

The next time you hear the phrase human in the loop, notice where it puts the human’s attention.

CHAPTER TWO

The Most Valuable Resource on Earth

A TUESDAY EVENING

You check the time and realize three hours are gone. You cannot say where. The hours were spent. You were not, exactly.

What is the most valuable resource on the planet?

People reach for gold. Then money. The thoughtful ones say time. All three are wrong.

Gold is valuable because people attend to it. Money is a promise that someone will later attend to what you need. Time is closer, but time passes whether or not anyone is there. A sleeping hour is still an hour. An hour spent staring at a screen you will not remember is still an hour. Time is the container. What matters is what fills it.

The most valuable resource on the planet is human attention.

It is the hour with a human being in it. It cannot be made by any machine, because it is human by definition. That is not a trick of wording. Human attention is only applicable to a human being. A delegate can carry responsibilities, predict outcomes, finish work and return exceptions. It cannot spend human attention, because it has none to spend.

If you adopt that view, something changes in how you move through a day. You start asking a question most people never ask. Am I giving my very valuable human attention to a worthy cause?

That question will come back many times in this book, and I will have to be careful with it, because the Reality Equation says attention is not something you give. It is taken. Surprise takes it. A mismatch between

what happened and what was expected takes it. I will reconcile those two ideas in Part Four. For now, hold onto the simpler truth underneath both. Attention is scarce, it is human, and it is always being spent on something.

Think about what a village once valued. A village needed people who could bear and raise children, people who could guard the walls, people who could hunt, people who could plow. That is what greatness looked like, because that is where attention had to go. Did a village want more people who could do none of those things? It did not. Another person who could not hunt or plow was another mouth to feed. That instinct is very old, and it is still in us.

But notice what it is really measuring. It is not measuring the person. It is measuring what the person's attention can be applied to. When survival consumed every hour, the only attention worth having was attention that served survival. When survival is carried, that measure stops working, and a different one takes its place.

That is what the age of AI is about to do to us on a scale we have never seen. It is about to carry a great deal. And when it does, the value of a human being will be measured by the thing that was always underneath: where that person's attention goes.

THE LINE

Not gold, not money, not time. Human attention, the hour with a human in it, is the most valuable resource on the planet.

NOTICE

Tonight, ask of one hour you spent today: was a human being really in it?

CHAPTER THREE

The Most Important Work You Do Is Not Yours

3:14 A.M.

> *You are asleep. Your heart has a long night ahead of it. It does not wake you to ask how you would like it done.*

What is the most important work you do as a human being?

It is not your job. Not your parenting, even, as much as that matters. The most important work you do, minute by minute, is breathing, circulating blood, digesting food, and keeping your balance. Stop any one of them and nothing else you do will matter for long.

Now ask how you do that work.

You do not know. You could not explain how digestion works in enough detail to perform it. You certainly do not supervise it. You are not the principal. You are not the boss of your breathing. There is no dashboard. You do not check in on your pulse to make sure it went through. You do not give it any attention at all, and that is exactly how it is supposed to work.

So the most important human work you do is being done for you, in a delegated fashion, and you are not directing it.

I covered the mechanism in The Attender. Your subconscious is not breathing. It is predicting your breath so well that the actual breath and the expected breath are the same. Reality equals one. The logarithm of one is zero. Nothing reaches you. I will not repeat the whole argument here. What I want you to see is what it implies about the relationship between importance and attention.

They have nothing to do with each other.

The most important work in your life takes none of your attention. That is not a failure of your priorities. It is a triumph of absorption. And it should change how you think about what AI is about to do. When a delegate takes over something important, the fear is that you are losing control of something that matters. But you never had control of the things that matter most. They were carried. That is why you were free to attend to anything else at all.

The relationship between your conscious attending self and your subconscious is the model for the relationship between the attender and the delegate. Assuming nothing has gone wrong with a person's health, there is no checking in at all, for a whole lifetime. That is the standard. It is a high one. It is also proof that the standard can be met, because it has been met in every human body that ever lived.

THE LINE

The most important work you do is breathing, circulation, digestion and balance, and it takes none of your attention. Importance and attention are unrelated.

NOTICE

Name the most important thing in your life that you have never once attended to.

PART TWO

The Ratchet

Attention never goes down on its own. It climbs, one absorbed floor at a time.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Mother at the Edge of the Forest

NIGHT, LONG AGO

A mother counts five small heads near a dying fire. She is listening to the dark beyond the trees. She is not thinking about her feelings.

I want to put two people side by side.

The first is a mother, a long time ago. She has five children. They are hungry, and so is she. The night is getting colder. Somewhere beyond the trees there is an animal, or there are men, who might come for them. Every unit of her attention is spoken for. Food. Warmth. Safety. The next hour, and the hour after that. She is not concerned with her feelings. She cannot be. Her attention must go to survival.

The second is a person in 2026, stuck in traffic, fretting that the traffic jam will make them late for therapy. At the end of the drive, someone they pay well will listen to them talk about how they feel.

It is easy to make a cheap joke out of that comparison. I do not want to. Look at what it actually shows.

The second person is attending. They are busy, worried, preoccupied. Their attention is fully employed. But look at what it is employed on. Not food on the table. Not keeping the children from freezing tonight. Not the animal in the dark forest. Their attention is on their inner life, on their relationships, on whether they are becoming who they mean to become. That is a higher order of concern. It is only possible because every one of the mother’s concerns has been carried by something else.

Now transport the mother. Take her from her night by the fire and drop her into the worst circumstance modern society has to offer. There will be real hardship there. I do not wave that away. But she would feel that a miracle had happened. Water comes out of a wall. The cold is held off by a building. There is food in more places than she could count. Nobody in her world could have imagined it.

The evidence of this is all around us, and it is the most important observation in the humanities. We no longer attend to certain things, and we now attend to other things. And this keeps propagating. Each time a floor of human concern is carried, attention does not sit idle on the empty floor. It climbs to the next one.

THE LINE

The mother attends to survival because she must. Her descendants attend to their feelings because survival is carried. Both are fully attending. The floors are different.

NOTICE

List three things you worried about this week that no one in your great-great-grandparents' village could have worried about.

CHAPTER FIVE

Attention Only Climbs

A CLASSROOM, ANY YEAR

A physics teacher writes one sentence on the board. In an isolated system, entropy never decreases. Someone in the back row writes it down twice.

Here is the claim at the center of this book. Human attention only climbs.

Will we be attending a hundred years from now? Yes. Will we be working, in the sense we mean today? Probably not. Will we be plowing fields? Probably not. Managing our money? Probably not. Updating cell C1 in a spreadsheet? Probably not. Making sure we file the warranty claim on some website before midnight? Probably not.

Will we be attending? Yes. To higher-order or lower-order matters? Higher. It always goes higher.

When I said this in the lecture, I reached for entropy. In physics, the entropy of an isolated system stays the same or goes up. It never goes down. That is one of the very few one-way laws we know. And I said attention is like that. If everything beneath you is taken care of, you will not go to a lower level. You will only go higher.

I still believe that. But I want to state the honest version, because it is stronger than the analogy.

Attention does not climb by itself. Nothing about the human mind forces it upward. Attention climbs because of absorption. When a floor of concern is carried, when the actual matches the expected so reliably that Reality equals one and the logarithm is zero, that floor stops taking attention. And attention, as long as you are awake, is never unemployed. It is always on something. So it is taken by whatever still

surprises, and what still surprises is above the floor that went quiet.

That is the ratchet. Absorption is the pawl that keeps the wheel from slipping back.

And it tells you exactly when attention does go down. It goes down when a floor breaks. Catch a cold and your breathing, silent for months, takes your attention all day. Lose the power and the whole building remembers stairs. Let famine, war or collapse break the floor of survival, and attention falls all the way back to the mother at the edge of the forest. Not because anyone chose to go down. Because the floor stopped being carried, and the mismatch took the attention back.

So the law, stated carefully, is this. As long as the floors beneath you stay carried, your attention will not go back down to them. It will climb.

> *Attention is never unemployed. It is only reassigned, and as long as the floors hold, it is reassigned upward.*

This is why I think the age of AI is, for attention, the best news in a very long time. Delegates are about to carry floors we have never had carried before. The floor of forms and filings. The floor of money management. The floor of scheduling, following up, reminding, reconciling. All of the administrative weight of a modern life. Every one of those floors, once it goes quiet, sends attention up.

It also tells you what the real risk is. It is not that people will get lazy or dull. It is that floors will be half carried. A delegate that does the work but still asks you to check it has not absorbed anything. The work moved. The attention did not. A ratchet with a loose pawl slips.

$$\textit{Floor carried: } R = A / E = 1,\ \ln R = 0$$

A carried floor takes no attention. Attention is taken by whatever still surprises, and that is above the floor that went quiet.

THE LINE

Attention climbs because absorbed floors go silent. It falls only when a floor breaks. The ratchet is absorption.

NOTICE

Remember the last outage you lived through, and notice how far down your attention fell, and how fast it climbed back.

CHAPTER SIX

Nobody Mourns the Mill

A KITCHEN, THIS MORNING

You toast a slice of bread. It does not cross your mind that someone once spent a whole day turning grain into the flour inside it.

Ask yourself whether anybody is disappointed that machinery took over milling grain into flour.

Nobody is. Nobody got upset, in any lasting way, when the sewing machine made clothing so much faster than hands alone. The people whose work it was felt it, and that was real. But their grandchildren did not mourn. They did not even notice. The floor went quiet.

Agriculture is the clearest case in history. For most of human existence, plowing the field and finding food consumed the attention of nearly everyone. Today only a very small share of people in a country like the United States work in farming, and yet the output of food is so large that it is practically abundant. I wrote about this in Someone Still Grows the Peaches. The point is not the figure. The point is what it means. Almost the entire human species stopped attending to the production of food, and the food did not stop.

That is absorption at civilizational scale. Do we still need plowing done at the field level? Of course. Is it done by a machine, at a scale no village could have imagined? Yes. Does anyone care? Not really.

And where people still go hungry today, the cause is rarely the field. It is how food is moved, governed, and fought over. That is a different floor, and it is not yet carried.

This chapter is short on purpose, because its lesson is simple and it is the lesson most people forget. When a floor is absorbed, the people who lived on that floor feel the loss. Their grandchildren feel nothing

at all. The loss is real for one generation. The silence is permanent.

The administrative floor that AI is about to carry will feel exactly like that. The people who built their identity on that floor will feel it as a loss. Their grandchildren will not be able to imagine why anyone ever filled out a form.

THE LINE

When a floor is absorbed, one generation feels the loss and every generation after it feels nothing. The silence is the success.

NOTICE

Name one thing your grandparents did by hand that you have never once thought about doing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

We Are Not Getting Dumber

A PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE, 2026

The teacher slides a page across the desk. Your child cannot read cursive, she says, as if reporting a symptom.

A lot of people say that in the age of AI we are forgetting how to think. That we are getting dumber.

That is not possible. Not in the way they mean.

Will a teacher say that her students can no longer write in cursive? Yes, and she will be right. A hundred years from now, almost nobody will write in cursive. It will be considered archaic. A few calligraphers will still exist a thousand years from now, the way a few people still shoe horses. But cursive will not be taught in schools. Does that mean everybody is stupider? Of course not.

Take long division. If you use a calculator while you work on the nature of quantum gravity, you are not stupider for skipping the long division. The mere fact that you are working on quantum gravity at all places you at a higher order than the person carefully dividing by hand. Do you still know how to do long division? Maybe not. It does not matter.

If you have ever watched the physicist Leonard Susskind lecture at a chalkboard, you have seen him slip on basic algebra, writing a power of r that should have been another. He does not claim to be a great mathematician. By most standards he is in the top one percent of the top one percent of people who think about the universe. The slips are not a sign that something is missing. They are a sign of where his attention is. It is on something much higher order than the fundamentals, and the fundamentals are carried well enough that a slip

is caught and fixed and forgotten.

What the worried teacher sees is real. The conclusion she draws is wrong. A lost skill is usually an absorbed floor. The attention that once went into it did not disappear. It went up.

I want to be fair to the worry, because there is a real version of it. Some floors are worth keeping in your hands even after a machine can carry them, because handling them teaches you to notice when the machine is wrong. A person who has never estimated anything cannot tell when a number is absurd. That is a real cost. But it is a cost of a half-carried floor, not a sign of a falling mind. The answer is not to refuse the calculator. The answer is to make sure the floor is truly carried, so that when something does go wrong, it comes back to you as an exception, loudly, instead of slipping past.

THE LINE

A lost skill is usually an absorbed floor. The attention that went into it did not vanish. It climbed.

NOTICE

Name one skill you have lost. Then name what your attention does now instead.

PART THREE

Titles That Disappeared

Every vanished job title is a floor that went quiet. The people did not vanish. Their attention moved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I Am a Computer

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, 1890S

A row of women at long tables, glass photographic plates of the night sky in front of them, ledgers open, pencils moving.

For a long time, computer was a job title, and it was held by people.

At the Harvard College Observatory in the late nineteenth century, a team of women worked through glass photographic plates of the sky, classifying stars and doing the arithmetic astronomy needed. They were called computers. Many were highly educated. Some of them, working in that role, made discoveries that changed how we understand the universe. Human computers worked for governments, for navies, for engineering projects, for banks, and for wartime laboratories. When someone at a party said I am a computer, it meant something specific and respectable.

Alan Turing, describing a human computer in 1950, put it precisely. Such a person is supposed to be following fixed rules, with no authority to deviate from them in any detail. That is the definition of a floor. Fixed rules, faithfully followed, are exactly the kind of work prediction can carry.

And it was carried. Today the job title does not exist in any everyday sense. Is there a human computer somewhere? Possibly. Somebody might still be doing it for some reason. But when I say the job is gone, I mean it the way you would mean it about anything that has gone quiet. From an everyday perspective, it does not exist.

Here is the part that matters for this book. The women who were computers were not the arithmetic. The best of them proved it. Their attention, when it was not consumed by the arithmetic, went to

patterns in the data, to questions about what the patterns meant, to the stars themselves. The title described the floor they were standing on. It never described them.

THE LINE

Computer was a job title held by people until the floor was carried. The title described the floor, never the person standing on it.

NOTICE

Look at your own title and ask honestly: does it describe you, or the floor you stand on?

CHAPTER NINE

How High Do You Go?

A DEPARTMENT STORE, 1940S

A woman in white gloves pulls the gate closed and announces the floor: Fourth, housewares and linens.

Elevator operator was once a real job, and in big cities an important one. An operator opened and closed the gates, controlled the speed and direction of the car, took requests, and announced the floors. Tall buildings depended on them. When New York's elevator operators went on strike in the fall of 1945, the city's towers became nearly unusable, and a vast number of people could not get to work.

At a party, someone who said I am an elevator operator might have drawn real interest. Those things scare me, a guest might say. How high do you go?

Automatic elevators already existed. People did not trust them. Accounts from the era describe passengers walking into a car with no operator, looking around, and walking right back out to find someone to ask where the operator was. The machine could do the work. The floor was not yet carried, because people still attended to it. They needed to see a person at the controls.

Then, over the following decade or so, the attending stopped. Today you step into an elevator, press a button, and think about something else entirely. Nobody wonders who is driving. The actual matches the expected so completely that the elevator does not reach you at all.

Notice the order of events, because it will repeat with AI. First the machine could do the work. Then, for a while, people kept attending anyway, out of distrust, and the floor stayed in their attention even though the work had moved. Only after the record of trouble-free rides

grew long enough did the expectation change, and the floor went silent.

That is how absorption actually happens. No one can decide to stop attending. The expectation is retrained by a record of what actually happened, ride after ride, until there is nothing left to notice. The road to silence runs through history, and it takes time.

THE LINE

The automatic elevator existed before people stopped attending to it. A floor goes silent only when the record of what actually happens retrains the expectation.

NOTICE

Name one thing an AI already does for you that you still check anyway. That is a floor waiting on its record.

CHAPTER TEN

The Spreadsheet Is a Plow

4:47 P.M., A BANK TOWER

An analyst nudges a number in column F, watches three charts redraw, and nudges it back. The story is almost right.

Now the uncomfortable one.

Today, when someone says they are a financial analyst at a major bank, people are impressed. That is a serious job. It pays well. It sounds like a good life. But consider what it often amounts to, day to day. A financial analyst is, much of the time, a spreadsheet jockey. Numbers get moved around in a spreadsheet until the spreadsheet tells a particular story.

A thousand years from now, that will be considered the same thing as plowing. A low-level activity that people once had to attend to, because nothing else could carry it.

I say this without contempt. The analyst is not the spreadsheet any more than the Harvard computer was the arithmetic. There is real judgment inside that job: knowing which story is true, which number is suspicious, which question a decision actually turns on. That judgment is the part that climbs. The moving of numbers is the floor.

And that floor is about to be carried. Not someday. Now. A delegate can maintain the model, reconcile the figures, rebuild the charts, and come back only with what does not fit. When that happens, the person who called themselves a financial analyst will discover how much of their attention was on the floor and how much was on the judgment. Some will discover it was almost all floor. That is going to be painful, and I do not want to pretend otherwise.

But it is the same pain the computers felt, and the elevator operators, and every generation that stood on a floor as it went quiet. The answer is not to defend the floor. It is to notice where the attention goes next.

Most people in 2026 still hold a great deal of their identity in a work title. Financial analyst. Account manager. Coordinator. Specialist. When someone asks what do you do, they answer with the floor. That answer is about to stop working, which is why the question has to change.

THE LINE

Moving numbers in a spreadsheet will one day look exactly like plowing. The judgment inside the job is what climbs.

NOTICE

Take your own job and split it in two: the part that is a floor, and the part that is judgment. Be honest about the proportions.

PART FOUR

The Honest Audit

You cannot will your attention anywhere. You can account for where it went, and change what still takes it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Taken, Not Given

YOUR DESK, MID-MORNING

You resolve to spend the day on the thing that matters. By eleven the inbox, a vendor, and a late invoice have each taken their share.

I promised to reconcile two ideas.

The first is the lecture's question. Am I giving my valuable human attention to a worthy cause?

The second is the Reality Equation's claim. Attention is not given. It is taken. Reality is the ratio of the Actual to the Expectation. Surprise is the logarithm of that ratio, and surprise is what takes attention. When the actual matches the expected, the ratio is one, the logarithm is zero, and nothing reaches you. When they differ, the gap takes your attention whether you agreed to it or not.

Both are true, and here is how.

You cannot will your attention anywhere in the moment. If the late invoice surprises you, it will take your attention, and no resolution you made at breakfast will stop it. No one can set their own expectation, either. Not even you. The denominator is brought by the prediction machine before reality arrives. You inherit it.

But you are responsible for something else. You are responsible for which floors are still uncarried.

Every matter you keep in your own hands is a matter that can still surprise you. Every responsibility you have not handed to a delegate is a responsibility whose mismatches will keep taking your attention. And every one you have handed over, truly handed over, will eventually go quiet, because the delegate's record retrains your

expectation, the same way the elevator's record did.

So the honest way to ask the lecture's question is not, am I giving my attention to a worthy cause, as if attention were a coin I could place. It is, what am I still leaving uncarried, and is that where my attention should be spent?

The causal path is always the same. You act. Your actions leave artifacts. The artifacts become history. History is the actual. Only the actual retrains prediction. And when prediction is retrained, the floor goes silent and attention climbs.

You do not steer attention directly. You steer it the long way around, through the arrangements you make. That is slower. It is also the only way that works.

act → artifacts → history → Actual → prediction retrained → floor silent → attention climbs

You cannot reach your expectation directly. The only road runs through the numerator, and it runs one way.

THE LINE

Attention is taken by surprise, not given by will. You are responsible for it the long way around, by what you leave uncarried.

NOTICE

Name one thing that took your attention today that you could have handed to a delegate last month.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Attention Is a Stock-Keeping Unit

9:40 P.M. · THE KITCHEN TABLE

A blank page with today's date at the top. You are about to write down where your attention actually went, not where you meant it to go.

Human attention is quantifiable.

You can think of it the way a business thinks about inventory, as a stock-keeping unit. A countable thing, with a history, that went somewhere. And because it can be counted, it can be audited. You can sit down at the end of a day and say, plainly, here is where I spent my human attention today.

You should. And the accounting should be honest.

Many people feel they live productive, worthwhile lives. Then they do the accounting. They look at where the attention actually went, hour by hour, and they find that most of it went to moving numbers in a spreadsheet, chasing a reply, re-entering the same information into a third system, and filling out a form before a deadline. The feeling of a full life and the ledger of an attended life are not the same document.

Here is how I would do the audit.

First, list what took your attention today. Not what you did. What reached you. The things you noticed, worried over, checked, decided, answered.

Second, sort each line onto a floor. Survival and health, if anything there broke. The administrative floor: forms, follow-ups, reconciliations, scheduling, the warranty claim, cell C1. The floor of people: a conversation, a person who needed you, someone you were really with. The floor of exceptions: things that genuinely needed a

human judgment because they did not fit. And the top floor, the one I will describe in the next chapter: the thing you are trying to make real, the idea you serve.

Third, look at the administrative floor, and for each line ask one question. Could a delegate have carried this, as a responsibility, so that it would never have reached me?

Most people find that the administrative floor is the largest line in their ledger. That is the floor AI is about to absorb. The audit shows you, concretely, how much of your attention is about to be released, and it shows you which responsibilities to hand over first.

Do not use the audit to scold yourself. Scolding is just another thing taking your attention. Use it the way a business uses an inventory count. To see where the stock went, so you can change the arrangements that sent it there.

> *The feeling of a full life and the ledger of an attended life are not the same document.*

THE LINE

Human attention can be counted like inventory. An honest daily audit shows how much of it is spent on floors a delegate could carry.

NOTICE

Do the audit once, tonight, on paper. Circle every line that a delegate could have carried.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

What Higher Means

EARLY MORNING, BEFORE ANYONE WAKES

A thought you have been circling for months arrives whole while the coffee brews. You did not summon it. You were simply free when it came.

I keep saying higher. I owe you a definition.

The Reality Equation says expectation is complex. It has two parts. E = P + iI. The real part is Prediction: what habit and history expect. The imaginary part is the Ideal: the pull of a coherent idea, the thing a matter is trying to become. People do not have ideas. Ideas have people.

That gives a clean way to say what lower and higher mean.

Lower-order matters are matters of prediction. They are routine, repeatable, and carried by habit. Plowing. Arithmetic. Operating the car. Reconciling the accounts. These are exactly the matters a prediction machine can absorb, whether that machine is your subconscious or an AI delegate. When they are absorbed, they go silent.

Higher-order matters are the ones where the Ideal is part of the expectation. The person in front of you, whom no prediction fully captures. The question about quantum gravity that nobody has answered. The idea you are trying to make real, the business, the book, the community, the child. These matters keep reaching you even when the work on them is done, because the Ideal is still pulling. A delegate has no imaginary part. It can carry the prediction. It cannot carry the Ideal. That stays with the attender.

This is why the ratchet points upward and not sideways. When the floors of prediction are carried, what is left to take your attention is the part no prediction machine can hold. People. Exceptions. Ideas. Attention climbs toward the Ideal because that is all that is left once the prediction floors fall silent.

It also explains why I asked, in the lecture, whether you are giving your attention to where God intended it to go from the very beginning. I do not mean that as a slogan. I mean that a human being was never built for the floor. Every floor that gets carried returns a person a little closer to what a person is for.

And it explains the phrase worthy cause. A worthy cause is not one you invent and then aim your attention at. You cannot set your own Ideal. You cannot reach into the denominator. A worthy cause is one where an idea can find you, and it can only find you if you are not consumed by the floor. The work of the attender is to keep the lower floors carried, so that when the idea arrives, someone is there.

$$E = P + iI$$

Prediction can be absorbed by a delegate. The Ideal cannot. Higher order is wherever the Ideal is part of what you expect.

THE LINE

Lower order is the floor of prediction, which a delegate can carry. Higher order is wherever the Ideal is part of the expectation, which only the attender can hold.

NOTICE

Name the idea that has you. Then count how much of today’s ledger it got.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Letting Go of the Title

A CONFERENCE LANYARD, 2026

Name. Title. Company. You read hundreds of them in a day and remember none, except your own.

Letting go is the hard part. I have written about it before, and I keep returning to it because it is where most people get stuck.

The difficulty is not technical. A delegate can be set up in an afternoon. The difficulty is that most people in 2026 still keep a large part of their identity in a work title. When the title describes a floor, and the floor is carried, the identity feels carried away with it.

That is why the question has to change. What do you do invites you to answer with the floor. It asks for a title, and titles describe floors. What are you attending to invites you to answer with the climb. It asks where your attention is now, which is the only thing about your working life that was ever truly yours.

Try answering it out loud. Not I am a financial analyst. Something like: I am attending to whether the company I work for will still exist in ten years, and what it would take. Or: I am attending to my daughter’s first year of school, and to a question about soil chemistry I cannot let go of. The second kind of answer is stranger. It is also more honest, and much more interesting at a party.

The people who let go of the title first will discover something the rest will take longer to learn. The title was never protecting them. It was hiding them. Underneath the floor they stood on, there was always a person whose attention wanted to go somewhere else.

THE LINE

What do you do asks for a title, and titles describe floors. What are you attending to asks for the climb.

NOTICE

Write one honest sentence that answers what are you attending to without naming your job.

PART FIVE

The Century of the Attender

When the floors are carried, the scarce thing on earth is a person whose attention is free.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When People Are Sought After

A CITY HALL, 2056

A banner over the entrance welcomes new residents. Inside, an office whose only job is persuading people to move here.

Here is a prediction that sounds strange in 2026 and will not sound strange for long.

Human beings will be sought after. Cities, nation-states and corporations will recruit people like nothing else. Humans will be considered the greatest thing alive, and treated that way.

Think back to the village. When attention had to go to survival, a person who could not hunt or plow was another mouth to feed. That instinct still shapes how societies talk about people. In 2026, nations argue about how many newcomers to admit, and some talk about sending people away. Whatever anyone thinks of those arguments today, they share a hidden premise: that an additional person is mainly a cost.

That premise belongs to the floor. It makes sense when a person's value is measured by the labor that person can perform on a floor of necessity. It stops making sense once those floors are carried by delegates that cost almost nothing to multiply. When the floors are carried, a delegate can be copied a million times. A human being with free attention cannot be copied at all.

In a world like that, the scarce thing is not labor. It is attention. And human attention, by definition, comes only with a human. Every additional person is another attender, another place where an idea can arrive, another history maker. In my book Trillions I argued that after human population peaks, AI delegates acting on our behalf will

multiply into the trillions as consumers. Put that beside this book's claim and the picture is clear. Delegates become abundant. Attenders become rare. Rare things are sought after.

So I expect that within about thirty years, places will compete openly to attract people, the way they compete today to attract companies. It is not that far away. And the posture of 2026, the posture of the village counting mouths, will look the way a starving village's suspicion of strangers looks to us now: understandable, and from another world.

THE LINE

When delegates carry the floors, labor becomes abundant and human attention becomes scarce. Scarce things are sought after.

NOTICE

Ask what your city would do differently if it believed every new resident was an asset rather than a cost.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What I Expect

A DINNER, SOME YEARS FROM NOW

A stranger asks what you are attending to. You answer without mentioning your job, and nobody finds that odd.

These are the predictions this book commits to. Each is stated so that it can fail. The ledger in Chapter Eighteen gives each one its evidence, its requirement and its failure condition.

The question changes.

By the mid-2030s, in a growing number of settings, people will introduce themselves by what they are attending to rather than by a job title. Titles that name a floor, the person who moves the numbers, the coordinator of the forms, will fade from everyday conversation the way computer and elevator operator did.

The administrative floor goes silent.

Within twenty years, most of the forms, follow-ups, reconciliations and filings that fill a 2026 workday will be carried by delegates so completely that young adults will not think of them as work at all, any more than they think of operating an elevator.

The honest audit becomes ordinary.

Personal delegates will routinely give people an accounting of what reached their attention and why, the exceptions and the reasons, not a dashboard of everything that went right. People will use it to decide what to hand over next.

Attention climbs, and the evidence is the questions.

No generation of the AI era will be less capable at its frontier. The skills teachers mourn will really be lost, and the questions people attend to will be harder than the ones before. The complaint that we are getting dumber will be repeated for decades and will keep being wrong.

People are sought after.

By about 2056, cities, nations and companies will compete openly to attract people, treating each additional person as an asset rather than a cost, because human attention will be the scarce resource and only a human has it.

THE LINE

Five predictions about the attender’s climb, each stated so it can fail.

NOTICE

Pick the prediction you most doubt, and keep an eye on it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My Own Attending

A TUESDAY IN CHARLESTON, NOVEMBER 2026

A recording ends. The man who made it goes back to the people in the room.

I try to live by this, and I should say how.

I run Charleston AI, a local AI services business, out of a facility we opened in January 2026. I write a great deal. I teach. On any given week there are clients, students, books, a blog, and a business to keep alive. If I attended to all of it myself, nothing I care about would get my attention at all.

So I have one operating principle with my delegate. I trust you. Only bring matters to me worthy of my attention. Decide and handle everything else. Bring me only what needs me: the real decisions only I can make, the actions that cannot be undone, and the things that only I can answer.

That is the honest audit turned into an arrangement. It does not mean I have stopped caring what happens. It means I have stopped attending to the floors, so that I can attend to what is above them.

This book is an example. I recorded a twenty-six-minute lecture on a Tuesday morning. My delegate found the recording, read my earlier books, checked the history, wrote the chapters, built the pages, made the covers, and published it. My attention was spent on the idea. Everything else was carried. I mention that not to boast about the tools but because it is the claim of the book, demonstrated. If attention only climbs, the proof is not in the argument. It is in where the attention went.

I tell my students, who are mostly in their early twenties, to let their first employer be their first customer, and to keep their needs low enough that they are free to choose. I think that advice and this book are the same advice. Keep the floors carried. Keep your attention free. Then spend it on something worthy of a human being.

THE LINE

The author's arrangement: trust the delegate with the floors, and be brought only what is worthy of attention.

NOTICE

Write your own one-sentence operating principle for your delegate.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Ledger

A YEAR FROM NOW

You come back to this page with a pencil and mark each row: holding, slipping, or wrong.

Each prediction gets three panels: what is already true, what has to happen, and where I am probably wrong.

The question changes.

ALREADY TRUE

Job titles that named a floor have vanished before: computer, elevator operator, switchboard operator. Younger people already describe themselves by projects and interests more than employers.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegates have to carry enough of the administrative floor that a job title stops describing what a person’s attention is on.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If by the mid-2030s people still answer with a title and nobody asks what you are attending to, the language did not move and I was early or wrong.

The administrative floor goes silent.

ALREADY TRUE

Delegates can already complete forms, reconcile records and follow up without being watched step by step.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

People have to stop checking, which takes a long record of trouble-free work, the way the elevator needed years of uneventful rides.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If twenty years from now the forms are filled by machines but people still review every one, the work moved and the attention did not. That is automation, not absorption, and the prediction fails.

The honest audit becomes ordinary.

ALREADY TRUE

Personal AI already keeps memory and can report what it handled. Some people already ask their delegate to bring them only exceptions.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegates have to report the exceptions and the reasons, not narrate their normal day, and people have to want the accounting.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If the industry builds more dashboards and more notifications instead, the audit will be swallowed by the very thing it was meant to replace.

Attention climbs.

ALREADY TRUE

Every absorbed floor in history, food, flour, cloth, arithmetic, sent attention to higher-order concerns. The worry that each new tool makes us dumber is very old and has not come true.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

The floors beneath people have to stay carried. The ratchet holds only as long as absorption holds.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

This is the one I would bet on, and also the one with the plainest failure. If a generation with its floors carried spends its freed attention on matters smaller than the ones it left, if the honest audit shows the climb reversed, then attention does not only climb and I was wrong. A broad collapse that breaks the lower floors would also send attention down, which is the law working, not failing, but it would end the climb all the same.

People are sought after.

ALREADY TRUE

Places already compete to attract companies and certain kinds of workers. Populations in many countries are aging and shrinking.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegates have to make labor abundant enough that the value of a person shifts from the labor they perform to the attention they bring.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If in 2056 the dominant view is still that an additional person is a burden, then labor was not absorbed the way I expect, or societies never learned to value attention, and this prediction fails.

THE LINE

Five predictions, each with its evidence, its requirement, and its plain failure condition.

NOTICE

Come back in a year and mark each row.

EPILOGUE

The Party Question, Again

A PARTY, A HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW

Someone asks the young woman by the window what she is attending to. She tells them. Nobody thinks it strange.

Go back to the four parties.

In 1895 she said, I am a computer, and she was standing on a floor of arithmetic that a machine would one day carry. In 1935 he said, I run an elevator, and he was standing on a floor that would go quiet within a generation. In 2026 she said, I am a financial analyst, and the floor beneath her was already beginning to move.

None of them were the floor. Each of them was an attender standing on one, spending the most valuable resource on earth on the only thing that could not yet be carried.

The floors will keep going quiet. Breath and balance went first, before any of us had words. Food followed, then cloth, then arithmetic, then the elevator. Forms and filings and spreadsheets are next. Each time, one generation will feel the loss, and every generation after will feel nothing, because the silence is the success.

And each time, attention will climb. Not because anyone pushes it. Because a carried floor takes no attention, and attention is never unemployed. It goes to whatever still surprises. To the person in front of you. To the exception that genuinely needs you. To the idea that has been waiting for someone to stand still long enough to receive it.

So when someone asks you, at a party or anywhere else, what you do, you can answer the old way. Plenty of people still will.

Or you can answer the question underneath it.

What are you attending to?

REFERENCE

Glossary

Attender

The human being in the age of AI. Named for the one resource only a human has: human attention.

Delegate

The AI in the phase of late 2026 and early 2027. Something you hand a responsibility, not a task.

Talent

The likely next name for the AI. You do not prompt it much. It does what it does.

Actualizer

Whatever is having a reality. For a person, the one who acts and leaves history behind.

Floor

A layer of human concern, such as survival, food, arithmetic or administration, that can be carried so well it stops taking attention.

Absorption

A matter is absorbed when it can be carried without your attention. Actual meets Expectation, $R = 1$, $\ln R = 0$.

The ratchet

Attention climbs because carried floors go silent. It falls only when a floor breaks.

Honest audit

An accounting of where your human attention actually went, sorted by floor, to decide what to hand over next.

Higher order

Matters where the Ideal is part of the expectation: people, exceptions, ideas. A delegate cannot carry them.

Expectation

What the prediction machine brings before reality arrives. E = P + iI, Prediction plus Ideal. No one can set it, including you.