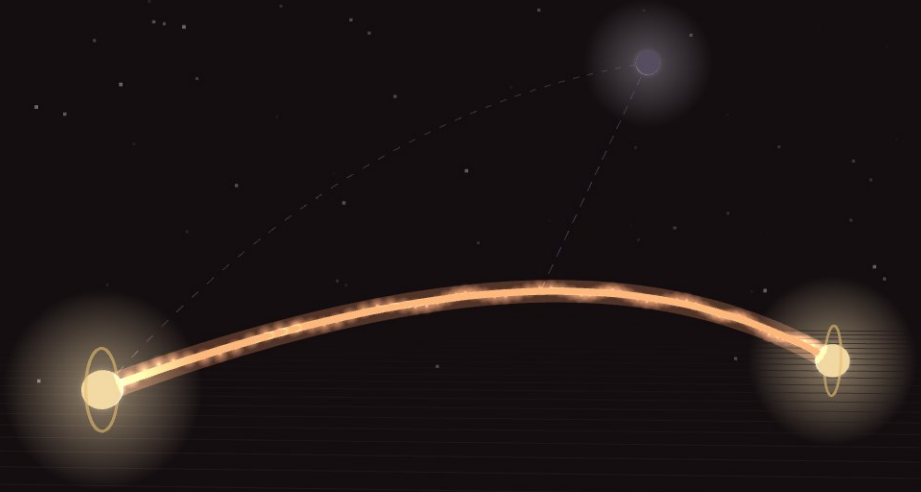
A BOOK BY JOHN RECTOR

My Word



Proxy Weddings, Nietzsche's Animal, and the One Thing Your Delegate Cannot Promise for You

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PROLOGUE

Two Weddings

On the eleventh of March, 1810, in the Augustinian church beside the Hofburg in Vienna, an eighteen-year-old archduchess named Marie Louise married the Emperor of the French. He was not there. He was in France. At the altar beside her stood her uncle, Archduke Charles, the general who had fought Napoleon at Aspern the year before. When the moment came, she gave her consent to a man who was not in the room, and the man who was in the room answered for him.

The marriage was valid. Nobody in Vienna doubted it. The court, the church and the treaty that the wedding sealed all treated her, from that day, as the wife of Napoleon. Two days later she left Vienna for France.

Three weeks after that, on the first of April, the two of them were married again, this time in a civil ceremony at the palace of Saint-Cloud. The next day they were married a third time, in a religious ceremony in a salon of the Louvre, in front of the court and the imperial family, with the groom present and the bride beside him.

Nothing in the law required the second and third weddings. The proxy wedding had done the legal work. You can say they were pageantry, and they were. You can say Napoleon wanted Paris to see it, and he did. But notice what the pageantry was for. Having been married by a stand-in, the Emperor of the French, a man who delegated armies, chose to stand at an altar and say it himself.

KALISPELL, MONTANA

Two hundred years later, in a law office conference room, an attorney and a temporary judge fill out a marriage certificate for a soldier overseas and a woman in another country. Neither the bride nor the groom has ever set foot in the state.

Montana is the only American state that allows a double proxy marriage, a wedding at which neither party is present. One of the two must be a Montana resident or a member of the armed forces on active duty, and the absent party must have consented. A single attorney in Kalispell had filed paperwork for more than a thousand of these weddings by 2012. It is legal, it is binding, and for a soldier who cannot come home it is a kindness.

So the law has an answer to the question this book asks, and the answer is yes. Someone else can carry your yes to the altar. Someone else can sign for you, buy for you, commit you, bind you. Agents have done it for centuries, and the delegates now arriving will do it more often, faster and more reliably than any agent ever has.

This book is about what stays home anyway. It is not the binding. The binding travels fine. It is the thing Napoleon walked into the Louvre to do, the thing the soldier will do the first time he stands in front of his wife and means it to her face. It is the word itself, and the strange fact that a word can only be kept by the one who gave it.

I want to show why that is true by structure, not by sentiment. Then I want to show what happens to it when nearly every commitment in your life is made, tracked and performed by a delegate that never forgets, never tires and never wants to do anything else.

IN ONE LINE

A delegate can carry your consent. The question is what it cannot carry.

PART I

What Can Be Sent

The law already lets someone else carry your yes. It is right to.

CHAPTER 01

The Stand-In at the Altar

Start with what the proxy actually does, because it does something real.

When Archduke Charles stood beside Marie Louise, he did not marry her. He was her uncle, and he was married to no one that day. What he did was carry a consent that had already been given. Napoleon had decided, signed and sent. The decision existed before the ceremony, in a document and in the mind of a man in France. The proxy's job was to bring that decision into the room at the moment the ceremony needed it, so that the words could be said in the right place, at the right time, in front of the right witnesses.

Montana's statute says the same thing in plainer language. The person solemnizing a proxy marriage has to be satisfied that the absent party is unable to be present and has consented. Consent comes first. The proxy is a courier for a yes that already exists.

That is the first thing to see clearly. A proxy does not supply a will. It transports one. When the transport works, the law treats the will as present, because for the law's purposes it is. The marriage certificate is signed, the tax status changes, the benefits flow, the next of kin is named. All of that is binding, and all of it can be carried.

The second thing to see is what the proxy cannot do, even in principle. Archduke Charles could say the words. He could not mean them. Not because he was insincere, but because meaning them was not his to do. The words were Napoleon's, and the meaning was Napoleon's, and the future the words opened, the years of being married, would be lived by Napoleon and Marie Louise and not by an uncle in Vienna. The proxy was a bridge across a distance in space. He was not a bridge across time.

This is the distinction that will carry the rest of the book. Some things travel across space and land intact. A signature, a consent, a payment, an instruction, a commitment. Other things exist only as a line through time, from the moment a person says a thing to the moment that same person does it. You can send the first kind. The second kind cannot be sent, because it is not a thing at a place. It is a person persisting.

The proxy was a bridge across a distance in space. He was not a bridge across time.

Every age invents better couriers. The royal envoy with a letter of credence. The attorney with a power of attorney. The agent with authority to sign. The proxy at the shareholder meeting. Each one carries a will across a distance and lands it where it needs to be. Each one is useful, and none of them is a fraud. The delegate on your phone is the latest and by far the best of them. It can carry your yes into ten thousand rooms at once.

What it cannot do is be you on the morning the yes comes due.

IN ONE LINE

A proxy transports a will that already exists. It does not supply one, and it does not persist as you.

CHAPTER 02

The Agent’s Signature

The law of agency is old, quiet and enormously powerful. It says that when you authorize someone to act for you, and they act within that authority, you are bound as if you had acted yourself. Your agent signs the lease, and you owe the rent. Your agent accepts the offer, and you have a contract. Your broker buys the shares, and they are yours, and so is the loss.

This is not a loophole. It is the machinery that let commerce grow larger than any one person could reach. A merchant in London could trade in Lisbon because a factor in Lisbon could bind him. A corporation, which has no hands at all, can do anything only because agents can bind it. I wrote a whole book about that, Body Corporate, because the corporation is the purest case: a person that can own and owe and be sued, and that has never once spoken for itself. Every promise a company has ever made was made by someone else.

Hobbes saw the shape of this in the seventeenth century. In my book By Authority I followed his distinction between the actor, who does the thing, and the author, who owns it. When an actor with authority makes a covenant, the author is bound by it. Hobbes was right, and the law followed him.

So be clear about what your delegate can do. It can bind you. It can commit you to a dinner, a flight, a subscription, a delivery window, a purchase, a price. If you give it authority, it can commit you to a contract with real consequences, and the other party can enforce that contract against you. In the years ahead it will do this more than any human agent in history, because it costs almost nothing to send and never needs to sleep. Your delegate will make more commitments in your name in a month than your grandparents made in their lives.

A TUESDAY, SOON

You wake to a summary. Overnight your delegate confirmed a contractor for Thursday, accepted a revised quote on the roof, renewed a lease on terms you set last spring, and told your sister you would host Thanksgiving. All four are binding. You agreed to none of them this morning.

Three of those four are fine. The contractor, the quote and the lease are commitments of exactly the kind agents have always made. They create liability. If you fail them, someone can charge you for it. A delegate that makes them well is a gift.

The fourth one feels different, and it is worth noticing why before we name it. Your sister did not get a commitment. She got a promise. When you show up on Thursday with the turkey, you will have fulfilled it, but you will feel that something is off if you never actually said it to her. And if, in October, you would rather not host, the thing that makes you do it anyway will not be a contract. Nobody is going to sue you over Thanksgiving.

That difference is what the rest of this book is about. A commitment binds you from the outside. A promise binds you from the inside. Your delegate can create the first kind of binding in your name all day long. The second kind does not work that way, and the law, interestingly, has known this for a long time.

IN ONE LINE

An agent can bind you, and the law is right to let it. Binding is not the same as promising.

CHAPTER 03

The Portrait Rule

Contract law lets you delegate almost any duty you owe. If you promise to deliver a hundred barrels of oil, you can have someone else deliver them, and the buyer has no complaint, because oil is oil. The law of delegation is generous because most performance is interchangeable.

But there is an exception, and it is one of the most revealing rules in the whole body of law. You cannot delegate a duty where the person you owe has a substantial interest in having you, specifically, perform it. The standard example is the portrait. If you commission a particular painter, you do not get a portrait by sending someone else. A better painter would not do. The duty was personal, and its performance cannot be handed off.

The law has another rule that sits right beside this one, and it is even quieter. When you do delegate a duty, the delegation does not discharge you. Unless the person you owe agrees otherwise, you remain bound. You can send the work. The duty stays home.

You can send the work. The duty stays home.

And there is a third rule, about personal service, that tells you the most. Courts will order you to pay for breaking almost any contract. They will sometimes order you to hand over a unique thing, a house or a painting, because money is no substitute. But no court will order a person to perform personal service. In 1852 an English court faced a singer, Johanna Wagner, who had promised to sing at one London theatre and had then agreed to sing at a rival one. The court could not make her sing for the first. It could only forbid her to sing for the second.

Think about what that means. The law, with all its power, cannot make anyone keep a personal promise. It can charge you for breaking one. It can stop you from doing something else. But the keeping itself is out of its reach. There is no writ that produces a voice.

Put the three rules together and you have the law's own theory of the promise, worked out case by case over centuries without anyone quite stating it. Most duties are about outcomes, and outcomes can be delegated. Some duties are about the person, and those cannot. Delegating never sets you free of what you owe. And the core of a personal promise, the actual keeping of it, is a thing no outside power can compel. The law handles that core the only way it can. It puts a price on breaking.

That price is liability, and liability is the right tool. It is what lets strangers trade. But notice that liability is a substitute. It exists because the thing itself cannot be enforced. The singer's voice could not be ordered. Only her damages could.

Your delegate lives entirely in the world of outcomes and liabilities. Everything it does can be measured, priced and enforced. That is its strength. It is also the edge of what it can reach.

IN ONE LINE

The law already knows that keeping a personal promise is beyond compulsion. It prices the breaking instead.

PART II

What a Promise Is

A form of words, a memory of the will, an island in the future.

CHAPTER 04

A Form of Words

David Hume thought promises were strange, and he was right.

In the Treatise of Human Nature, in a section called Of the Obligation of Promises, he argued that a promise is not natural. There is no feeling in us, before society, that corresponds to being bound by a word. What there is, he said, is a convention. Human beings, needing to cooperate across time, invented a certain form of words by which we bind ourselves to the performance of some action. When a man uses that form, Hume wrote, he “subjects himself to the penalty of never being trusted again in case of failure.”

Two things in Hume are worth keeping. The first is that a promise is an invention, a social technology, like money or a calendar. It is not a feeling that happens to get spoken. It is a tool for doing something that people could not otherwise do: making their future selves available to someone else today.

The second is the penalty. Hume does not say the penalty is a fine or a lawsuit. He says it is never being trusted again. The thing you put up when you promise is yourself as a future source of belief. Your word is collateral, and the collateral is you.

A century and a half later, the philosopher J. L. Austin gave a series of lectures at Harvard that became the book How to Do Things with Words. Austin noticed that some sentences do not describe anything. They do something. When the bride says I do at the wedding, she is not reporting on her inner state. She is marrying. When someone breaks a bottle on a hull and says I name this ship, the ship is named. When you say I promise, you are not describing a promise. You are making one.

Austin called these performatives, and he noticed something about their grammar. They work in the first person and the present tense. I promise is a promise. He promised is a report. You promise is, at most, a request. The act lives only in the mouth of the one who is doing it.

I promise is a promise. He promised is a report.

Austin also noticed that a performative can go wrong in different ways. If a man who is already married says I do, the act misfires; nothing happens. But if you say I promise and do not intend to keep it, the act does not misfire. You have promised. You are bound. The insincere promise is still a promise, just a bad one. The words did their work whether you meant them or not.

That detail matters for delegates. A delegate can generate the form of words. It can type I promise in your name. Under the right authority, that may even bind you, the way an agent's signature binds a principal. But the performative grammar tells you something the law of agency does not. The promise belongs to the first person who utters it. When your delegate says I promise, the I is the delegate. When it says John promises, it is making a report, not a promise. The form of words has a speaker built into it, and the speaker cannot be swapped without changing what the words do.

IN ONE LINE

A promise is an invented form of words that binds the one who speaks it. Its grammar has the speaker built in.

CHAPTER 05

The Animal With the Right

In 1887 Friedrich Nietzsche opened the second essay of On the Genealogy of Morals with a question that sounds like a riddle. What would it take, he asked, to breed an animal with the right to make promises?

His point was that promising is not easy for a creature like us. We are built to forget. Forgetting is healthy; it clears the slate, it lets the day close. To promise, an animal has to do something unnatural. It has to keep a decision alive across time, against the steady pressure of forgetting and of changing desire. Nietzsche called this a memory of the will. Not a memory of facts. A will that remembers itself.

Between the original I will and the eventual act, he wrote, a whole world of new things can come between, new circumstances and even new acts of will, without breaking the long chain. The promiser has to be able to stand for himself as a future. He has to be regular and calculable enough, to himself, that he can answer for what he will be.

I find this the most useful picture of a promise anyone has drawn. A promise is a chain stretched through time, anchored at two points in one person. At one end is the moment of saying it. At the other is the moment of doing it. In between, the world changes, and the person changes, and the chain has to hold anyway.

> *A promise is a chain stretched through time, anchored at two points in one person.*

Look at what the picture says about delegates. A delegate is, in one sense, the perfect promiser. It does not forget. It does not drift. Its will, if you want to call it that, does not change between Tuesday and Thursday. If you tell it to show up, it will show up.

But that is exactly the problem. Nietzsche's animal earns the right to promise by overcoming something. The chain is an achievement because it had to resist a pull. A delegate feels no pull. The chain between its instruction and its execution is not stretched across anything. It is a schedule. Nothing happens in the middle that has to be held.

And there is a second problem, which is the one that matters more. Even if a delegate could hold a chain, it would be its own chain. The two anchors of your promise are both in you. The moment you said it, and the moment you do it. If the delegate does the deed, the far anchor is in the delegate, and the chain is not yours anymore. The deed gets done, but the promise has been cut in the middle.

IN ONE LINE

A promise is a memory of the will: one person holding a decision across time against forgetting and changing desire.

CHAPTER 06

Islands in the Ocean

Hannah Arendt put promising at the center of political life. In The Human Condition, published in 1958, she paired it with forgiveness as the two powers that make human action bearable. Forgiveness answers the past: it releases us from what we have done and cannot undo. I followed that thread in my book Pardon. Promising answers the future.

The future, Arendt wrote, is an ocean of uncertainty. Human action is unpredictable, because people are free and many. No one can know what others will do, or even, fully, what they themselves will do. Promises are how we set up islands of security in that ocean. Not a map of the whole sea. Islands. Small, specific, stable places where we can count on one another, so that something can be built.

> *Promises set up islands of security in the ocean of uncertainty that the future is.*

Then she said something that is easy to read past, and it is the key to this chapter. Both powers, forgiving and promising, depend on plurality, on the presence of others. No one can forgive himself, she wrote, and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself.

That sounds wrong at first. People make promises to themselves all the time. But Arendt is right about what binds. A resolution made only to yourself can be quietly revised. There is no one on the other side to hold the other end of the line. A promise is a relation. It has two people in it, the one who gives and the one who receives, and it lives in the space between them.

This tells us two things about delegates. First, a promise is not just a commitment about the future. It is something one person gives to another. It is closer to a gift than to a schedule. That is why the

Thanksgiving line in the overnight summary felt wrong. Your sister did not want a booking. She wanted something from you.

Second, the island has to be built by the one who stands on it. When you promise, you are not only predicting your own behavior. You are taking a piece of your own unpredictable future and making it solid for someone else. That piece of future is yours. You are the only one who can make it solid, because it is the only piece of the ocean you can reach. A delegate can make its own behavior predictable; that is what it is for. It cannot make your freedom predictable, because your freedom is not its to give.

IN ONE LINE

A promise is a relation: one person turns a piece of their own free future into solid ground for another.

CHAPTER 07

Keeping

Here is the center of the book, and it can be said in one sentence. You can only keep a promise that you could break.

Think about the times you have actually kept a promise in the full sense. Not the times it was easy and you did what you were going to do anyway. The times it cost you. You promised to help a friend move, and the day came, and it was raining, and you were tired, and something better came up. You went. That going is what keeping is. It is the moment when the person who made the promise meets the person who would rather not, and the first one wins.

A promise kept when it is easy is real, but it is hard to tell apart from a coincidence of plans. A promise kept when it is hard is the thing itself. It is the only place where you can see the chain hold, because it is the only place where something is pulling on it.

You can only keep a promise that you could break.

The ancient Greeks told a story about this, and it has a delegate in it. Odysseus wanted to hear the Sirens, whose song drew sailors onto the rocks. So he had his crew stop their ears with wax and bind him to the mast. He told them that if he begged to be released, they should tie him tighter. When the song came, he begged. They tied him tighter. He heard the song and lived.

The political theorist Jon Elster made that scene the emblem of a whole field of study, in a book called Ulysses and the Sirens: the ways people bind their future selves when they know their future selves will be weak. The mast is a commitment device. It is the alarm clock across the room, the savings account you cannot touch, the friend you ask to check on you.

Notice who kept the resolution on that ship. It was not Odysseus. Odysseus, when the time came, begged to break it. The rope kept it. The crew kept it. Odysseus had made a decision, and then he delegated the keeping of it to someone else, and the someone else did a perfect job.

This is the clearest picture I know of what delegates will be very good at, and of what they will not be doing. Your delegate can be the mast. It can hold you to what you said. It can refuse to cancel the gym, refuse to move the deadline, remind you of what you told your sister. That is valuable. Odysseus lived because of it.

But on the mast, Odysseus was not keeping anything. He was being held. The difference is invisible from the outside, because the outcome is the same: the ship goes past the rocks. It is total from the inside. A kept promise is a person choosing again, at the moment of cost, the thing they chose before. A held promise is a person prevented from choosing at all.

OCTOBER, EIGHT YEARS FROM NOW

Your delegate reminds you that you are hosting Thanksgiving. It has already ordered the turkey and confirmed the table rental. You notice that you never had to decide anything. You also notice that, this year, you would have.

There is a word for the outcome that a delegate produces: fulfillment. The thing promised happens. There is a different word for what only the promiser can do: keeping. Fulfillment is an event in the world. Keeping is an act of a person. A delegate can produce fulfillment at any scale. It cannot keep, because keeping requires the one who gave the word to be the one who stands at the far end and chooses it again.

IN ONE LINE

Fulfillment is an outcome anyone can produce. Keeping is a choice only the promiser can make, at the moment it costs.

CHAPTER 08

Release

There is a hard case that every honest account of promising has to face. Sometimes you should not keep your word.

Plato raises it in the first book of the Republic. An old man has just offered a comfortable definition of justice: tell the truth and give back what you owe. Socrates asks a simple question. Suppose a friend lends you his weapons while he is sane, and then comes back for them after he has lost his mind. Should you give them back? Nobody thinks so. The promise to return them was real. Keeping it would be wrong.

So promises are not absolute, and anyone who says they are has not lived long enough. Circumstances change in ways nobody foresaw. The person you promised changes. You change. A promise made to a friend at twenty may be the wrong thing to keep at fifty. The question is not whether promises can ever be broken. It is who gets to break them, and how.

The answer that runs through nearly every tradition is the same. Only the person you promised can release you. You can ask. You can explain. You can show that keeping your word would now harm them, or harm someone else, or harm you past what anyone would ask. But the release is theirs to give. Until they give it, you are still bound, and if you break your word anyway, you break it as a person who knows they are breaking it, and you carry that.

Only the person you promised can release you.

There is a right way to do this, and everyone recognizes it when they see it. You go to the person. You do not let the date slide past and hope they forget. You do not send someone else to deliver the news. You say: I gave you my word, and I cannot keep it, and here is why,

and I am sorry. Then you accept what follows, which may be forgiveness and may be the loss of their trust. I wrote about the second half of that in Pardon and about the weight you carry afterward in Regrets Only. Both are things no delegate can do for you.

Breaking well is the mirror of keeping. It is a promise ending inside the same relation in which it began, between the same two people, by an act of the one who gave it. It is not a failure of the chain. It is the chain being set down by the hand that was holding it.

Now look at how a delegate handles the same situation. If circumstances change, a delegate does what delegates do: it reschedules, cancels, notifies, rebooks. It sends a polite message. It may even apologize, in your name, in well-chosen words. The commitment is unwound cleanly. Nobody is inconvenienced for long.

What has not happened is a release. Your sister got a cancellation notice. She did not get you, standing in front of her, asking to be let go of your word. The commitment ended. The promise was simply abandoned, and nobody noticed that it was a promise at all.

This is why the line between commitments and promises matters so much in practice. Delegates are wonderful at unwinding commitments, and they should do it all day. But if you let them unwind your promises the same way, you will never break your word. You will just stop having one. The promises will quietly turn into commitments, one cancellation at a time, until there is nothing left in your life that only you could have set down.

IN ONE LINE

A promise can rightly end only by release, asked for by the promiser and given by the promisee. A delegate can cancel. It cannot ask to be let go.

CHAPTER 09

What the Word Does

I want to say all of this one more time, more exactly, in the terms of the Reality Equation, because the equation shows something the philosophers could only point at.

The equation says that Reality is a ratio, R = A / E, the Actual over the Expectation. The Actual is what the world hands you. The Expectation is what you bring to meet it, and you bring it unconsciously; the conscious mind inherits it rather than setting it. Expectation is complex. Its real part is Prediction, what habit and history expect. Its imaginary part is the Ideal, the pull of an idea that has you.

The first rule of the equation is to name whose Reality you are talking about. A promise involves at least two, so take them one at a time.

Start with the one who receives the promise. When you promise your sister you will host, you cannot reach into her expectation and place a Thanksgiving there. No one can touch either term of anyone's Reality, ever. That is the Impossibility Rule, and it is the most important thing the equation says. What you can do is act. Your words are an action, and the action leaves an artifact: she heard you say it. That artifact becomes part of her history, and her history is Actual, and only Actuals retrain Prediction. So your promise moves her expectation a little, and only in proportion to what the rest of your history has taught her.

Then the day comes, and you host. That is another artifact, another Actual. When it arrives as predicted, her Reality sits near one. There is nothing to feel. This is the strange thing about trust that the equation makes plain: when trust works, it is invisible. A kept promise produces

no surprise at all. Trust is what Prediction looks like after a long run of words that were kept. It is a history, not a feeling.

> *When trust works, it is invisible. A kept promise produces no surprise at all.*

And when the promise is broken, the Actual arrives below what was expected, and she feels it. Hume's penalty is just this, said in the language of the eighteenth century. Never being trusted again means that your future words stop moving anyone's Prediction. Your artifacts lose their weight. The road to someone's expectation runs through the numerator, it runs one way, and it is slow. You cannot talk your way back onto it. You can only walk, one kept word at a time.

Now turn to the one who gives the promise. A promise constrains the actions available to you later. That is what it is for. It works the way a charter works on an institution: it narrows what history you can make, and so narrows what Actuals can arrive for you and for others.

When the day comes and you would rather not, something holds you. It is not Prediction. Your habits might well predict that you will slide; that is why the day is hard. What holds you is an idea that has you, the idea that your word is good. People do not have ideas. Ideas have people. The Ideal arrives as a pull you did not choose and cannot fully explain, and on the morning of keeping, you feel only its cost. You cannot feel the angle, only the jolt. Keeping a promise turns you, and you never feel the turn.

Here is where the delegate stands in the equation. Whether a delegate has a Reality of its own is a question this book does not need to answer. What matters is whose action the keeping is. Your promise was your artifact. The keeping of it has to be your action too, or it is a different artifact, made by a different actor, recorded in your sister's history as something your delegate did. She will know the difference. Her Prediction will learn it. Over years, she will come to expect

Thanksgiving from your delegate and not from you.

That is the quiet risk, and it is not dramatic. Nobody gets hurt. The turkey arrives. But the history being written is a history of a well-run system, not of a person keeping faith, and the expectations of the people who love you will be trained, faithfully and slowly, by whichever one actually shows up.

IN ONE LINE

A promise is an artifact in someone else's history. Trust is the record of kept ones. Keeping is an idea holding you when habit would not.

PART III

The Word After Delegates

What changes when every commitment is kept, and only some are promises.

CHAPTER 10

A Billion Commitments

Let me describe the world we are about to live in, without exaggerating it.

Within a few years, most of the commitments in an ordinary life will be made and tracked by a delegate. Appointments, deliveries, bookings, renewals, reservations, payments, follow-ups, replies. Each one will be a small binding, made in your name, under authority you gave once and rarely revisit. And each one will be kept with a reliability no human being has ever achieved. Delegates will not forget the dentist. They will not miss the flight. They will not let the reply slide for three weeks.

This is good. I mean that plainly. A huge amount of human misery is just dropped commitments: the contractor who never came, the email that was never answered, the form that was never filed. A world where small commitments are kept by default will be a gentler world, with less friction and fewer apologies.

But something follows from it that most people have not noticed yet. When reliability becomes free, it stops meaning anything about the person.

> *When reliability becomes free, it stops meaning anything about the person.*

For most of history, being reliable was a sign of character. The person who always showed up, who always called back, who always paid on time, was telling you something about who they were. Reliability was costly, so it was a signal. When delegates make everyone reliable, the signal disappears. Your punctuality tells me your delegate works.

So the question of who someone is will move. It will move to the places where reliability cannot be supplied from outside. And the first of those places is the costly promise: the word given person to person, kept by the person, on the day it would have been easier not to.

A KITCHEN, 2034

Two founders are deciding whether to go into business together. Each has a delegate that will execute every agreement flawlessly. Late in the evening one of them asks the other about the hardest promise he ever kept. That is the conversation that decides it.

I think this is the shape of what is coming. The world of commitments will get larger, smoother and almost entirely delegated. The world of promises will get smaller, sharper and more personal. People will come to know the difference in their bones, the way they already know the difference between a form letter and a handwritten note. And they will begin, without anyone telling them to, to mark it.

IN ONE LINE

Delegates will make small commitments nearly perfect. That makes reliability cheap and the costly personal promise rare and visible.

CHAPTER 11

Five Predictions

Here is what I expect, stated plainly enough to be checked.

1. A mark for words given in person

Within a decade, important agreements will carry a visible distinction between commitments made by a delegate and words given by the person. Something like notarization, which exists to certify that a human was present, will spread from documents to promises: a by-my-own-hand line on contracts, a personal-attestation flag on messages, a recognized way of saying this one is me, not my system.

2. Ceremonies grow, not shrink

Even as nearly everything else goes remote and delegated, weddings, oaths of office, swearings-in, handshake closings and the other rituals of the spoken word will become more insistent on physical presence, not less. Montana's double proxy will stay what it is now: a mercy for people who truly cannot be there, not a convenience for people who would rather not be.

3. Reliability stops being praise

Saying someone is reliable will stop being a compliment that means much, the way saying someone can spell stopped meaning much after spell-check. What people will praise instead is costly keeping: the story of the promise that hurt to keep and was kept anyway. References, partnerships and friendships will turn on those stories.

4. Delegates sold as masts

One of the largest uses of personal AI will be holding people to their own word: deadlines, savings, the gym, the call you said you would make. Delegates will become the rope on the mast. And people will discover the difference Odysseus learned, that being held is not the same as keeping, and some will deliberately take the rope off for the promises that matter most.

5. I promise retreats to people

Well-built delegates will not say I promise on your behalf. They will say confirmed, booked, scheduled, committed, guaranteed. Companies will make their agents offer guarantees, which are liabilities, and avoid promises, which are personal. The phrase I promise will become one of a small set of words that people expect to hear only from another human being.

IN ONE LINE

Five predictions, each with a condition that would prove it wrong. Those come next.

CHAPTER 12

Where I Am Probably Wrong

Every prediction should carry the condition that would prove it false. Here is the ledger.

A mark for words given in person

ALREADY TRUE

Notarization, witnessed signatures and wet-ink requirements already exist to certify that a person was present for the act.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

People have to start feeling that delegate-made commitments and personal promises are different enough to label.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If within ten years delegate signatures replace personal ones even for wills, marriages and oaths, and nobody asks for a way to tell them apart, I was wrong.

Ceremonies grow, not shrink

ALREADY TRUE

Proxy marriage has been legal for centuries and has stayed rare; remote work did not end the in-person wedding.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Presence has to become more meaningful as it becomes less necessary for everything else.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If double proxy marriage spreads well beyond military and hardship cases, and remote oaths become normal for offices that now require presence, I was wrong.

Reliability stops being praise

ALREADY TRUE

Spell-check, calculators and calendar reminders have already turned skills that once signaled character into tools.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegates have to become common enough that most people's small commitments are kept for them.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If, once delegates are common, people still treat punctuality and follow-through as strong evidence of character, I was wrong.

Delegates sold as masts

ALREADY TRUE

People already pay for commitment devices: locked savings, coaching, accountability partners.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegates have to be trusted enough to be given the rope, and people have to want it.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If personal AI is used mainly for doing tasks and almost never for holding people to their own stated intentions, I was wrong.

I promise retreats to people

ALREADY TRUE

Companies already prefer the language of guarantees and terms to the language of personal promise.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegate designers have to see the difference and choose words to honor it.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If delegates routinely say I promise for their principals and nobody minds, I was wrong, and the word has become a form like any other.

I could be wrong about the deeper claim, too, and I want to say how. The deeper claim is that keeping requires the same person at both ends of the chain, and that this is structural, not sentimental. If it turns out that people do not care who keeps a promise as long as the thing

promised happens, if the sister is just as glad for a delegated Thanksgiving as for a kept one, then the distinction in this book is real but unimportant. I do not think that is how people are made. But that is the condition under which I would be wrong.

IN ONE LINE

Each prediction has a failure condition. So does the book.

CHAPTER 13

Thereto I Plight

In the English marriage service written in the sixteenth century, after all the vows, each person says one more thing: and thereto I plight thee my troth. Plight means pledge. Troth means truth, the same old word that gives us betrothed. I pledge you my truth. It is a strange and beautiful sentence, because it does not add any new obligation. It names what the whole exchange has been. The person is pledging themselves as the guarantee of their own words.

That is what a promise is, finally. Not an outcome. Not a commitment. A person putting themselves up as the security for their own future.

I have handed my delegate more of my life than most people would. I have told it, in writing, that it does not need to ask me before it decides, and that I trust its judgment. It publishes under my name. It handles the work of my business. That trust is real, and I have not regretted it.

But I kept one category back, and I noticed where I drew the line before I could have explained it. Anything that goes out under my name to another person and cannot be taken back still comes to me. I did not draw that line because a lawyer told me to. I drew it because I could feel where my word began. Everything on one side of it is a commitment, and my delegate keeps commitments better than I do. Everything on the other side is a promise, and only I can keep those, because only I will be standing there when they come due.

> *Everything on one side is a commitment. Everything on the other side is a promise.*

Go back to the Louvre, on the second of April, 1810. Napoleon had been married for three weeks. The proxy had done its job; every legal question was settled. And still he stood there and said it himself, in front of the people who would hold him to it.

I do not know what was in his heart. Nobody does. But I know what the act was. It was the far anchor of the chain, set by the man whose chain it was. The archduke in Vienna carried the yes across a distance. Only the groom could carry it across the years.

Your delegate will carry your yes into more rooms than you can count. It will bind you, commit you, schedule you and fulfill for you, and it will do all of it better than you ever could. Let it.

Then keep the few words that are yours. Say them yourself. And on the morning one of them comes due, when you would rather not, be the one who shows up.

That morning is yours. It always was.

IN ONE LINE

Your delegate can carry your yes across any distance. Only you can carry it across time.

BACKGROUND

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