



THE  
HUMAN FLOURISHING  
FOUNDING ESSAY

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# Something is Tearing Us Apart.

*The Root Cause of Humanity's Growing Divide  
— and What Can Actually Heal Us*

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## Something Is Wrong

You feel it. Everyone does.

A dinner-table conversation tips into confrontation. A lifelong friendship fractures over a political opinion. You scroll through the news and realize your first instinct is no longer curiosity. It is dread. You watch institutions you once trusted — science, universities, journalism, government — behaving less like honest inquiry and more like tribal warfare.

We carry in our pockets more computing power than sent humans to the moon. We have cut extreme global poverty by two-thirds in a single generation. We stand at the edge of artificial intelligence that could help cure cancer, reverse climate change, and unlock human creativity.

And yet something is tearing us apart.

The divides are not just deep anymore. They are hardening into something irreconcilable. Neighbors who once disagreed now see each other as enemies. Ideas that history has already tested and found catastrophically wanting — authoritarianism, collectivism, strongman nationalism — are finding new audiences in every corner of the world, including societies that should know better. Social media, designed to bridge humanity, has become the most efficient engine for division ever invented. The institutions built to anchor shared reality have themselves been captured by the same tribal forces they were supposed to help us transcend.

This is the defining challenge of our time, and like anything that matters this much, it has a root cause that most of the conversation is missing.

That root cause is this:

*We are choosing fear when we could be choosing love.*

Every fracture and failure in this essay flows from that single truth. Neuroscience confirms it. So do the wisdom traditions, and they have been saying it for thousands of years.

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## Why Human Flourishing Exists

Human Flourishing is a non-partisan civic movement platform built to meet that challenge directly. We convene serious thinkers and leaders for rigorous, cross-perspective

inquiry into the science and philosophy of human thriving. We work to build the moral and social habits that sustain flourishing people and communities. And we are building a movement that thoughtful people across every social and economic perspective can authentically join.

We are not trying to replace the many organizations already doing important work in this space. We are trying to do what none of them are positioned to do alone: synthesize and amplify their efforts while asking the hard questions most institutions — for reasons of politics, funding, or social pressure — are not willing to ask publicly. Governance. Family. Poverty. Economic freedom. Institutional failure. The questions the full picture of human thriving actually demands.

This essay is the founding statement of that mission. It names the problem, traces its root cause honestly, and lays out the questions that will guide our work going forward.

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## The Operating System Beneath the Divide

To understand what is tearing us apart, we have to understand what is happening inside the human brain.

Modern neuroscience has confirmed something the world's great wisdom traditions have always known: we do not experience reality through a single system. We process the world through two different modes, and they work against each other.

One is ancient. Shaped over millions of years of evolutionary pressure, it exists to keep us alive in the face of immediate physical threat. Neuroscientists call it the threat-detection system. The wisdom traditions called it the voice of fear. The function is the same regardless of name: scan for danger, assume the worst, react fast, divide the world into allies and enemies, and do whatever survival requires.

In a world where the threat was a predator in the bush, this was life-saving. In the world we actually live in — complex, interconnected, saturated with ambiguity — it is catastrophic. That same ancient brain now runs every input through a threat filter. A critical email triggers the same neural pathways as a physical attack. A political disagreement activates the same tribal-warfare circuitry as a territorial conflict. Information overload floods the system with cortisol and adrenaline as the brain interprets complexity itself as existential danger.

The second system lives in the prefrontal cortex. It is the source of empathy, creativity, long-term thinking, and genuine connection. The wisdom traditions called it love, conscience, the higher self. It is the part of us that sees another human being as someone

to be understood rather than a threat to be neutralized. It creates instead of reacting. It holds complexity without collapsing into simplicity.

These two systems cannot fully operate at the same time. When fear dominates, wisdom goes offline. When cortisol floods the brain, the capacity for nuance and creative problem-solving genuinely diminishes. This is measurable, reproducible biology.

A civilization running on its fear brain produces exactly what we are watching — polarization, tribalism, collapsing trust, the retreat into whatever group promises safety from complexity. We are not worse people than our grandparents were. We are people with ancient brains trying to function in an environment those brains were never built for.

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## What the Ages Already Knew

The neuroscience matters because it is not telling us something new. It is confirming something very old.

For millennia, across cultures and traditions that had no contact with each other, the world's greatest teachers arrived at the same fundamental insight. The Stoics taught that the source of human suffering is not external circumstance but the interpretation we place on it. Buddhist teaching identified fear and aversion as the roots of suffering and developed practical methods for interrupting automatic reactions. The Hebrew prophets called their people repeatedly out of fear and toward covenant love. Jesus distilled the entire moral law into the command to love, even one's enemies. Confucius built a civilization's philosophy on ren: benevolence, humaneness, genuine care for others. Indigenous healing traditions across every continent developed practices for restoring the inner conditions that allow communities to thrive.

These traditions disagreed about theology, cosmology, and metaphysics. They agreed on this: the fear-based response to life diminishes us and the people around us. The love-based response — curious, generous, connected, creative — lets us and the people around us flourish. That kind of convergence, across centuries and continents and entirely independent intellectual traditions, is worth taking seriously.

Modern neuroscience is now providing the mechanism. Gratitude practice activates neural pathways associated with empathy while quieting the threat-detection system. Pausing before reacting interrupts the automatic fear response and creates the neurological conditions for wisdom. What ancient teachers discovered through centuries of practice, brain imaging can now confirm in real time.

This is the intersection Human Flourishing stands at. Ancient wisdom and modern science, each confirming and enriching the other, drawn from the full inheritance of human understanding without being captured by any single tradition.

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## **The Accelerant: A World Changing Faster Than We Can Process**

If fear is the operating system driving the divide, the accelerating pace of change is the fuel keeping it running hot.

In 1975, a person might read the morning paper, watch the evening news, and subscribe to a few magazines. Information arrived in manageable doses, at a pace that allowed for reflection. Today, the volume of information we produce in a single day would have taken our grandparents' generation years to encounter. Data creation has become so rapid that the tools we use to track it cannot keep up. News breaks by the second. Social media algorithms — optimized not for truth or connection but to capture, addict, and monetize attention — have learned that outrage and fear keep people scrolling longer than nuance or hope.

ChatGPT reached 100 million users in two months. Instagram took two and a half years to reach the same number. The telephone took generations. Each wave arrives faster than the last, and the rate of acceleration is itself accelerating. Artificial intelligence will bring another step-change in the pace of transformation, one that will reshape work, education, creativity, and perhaps the very nature of human purpose within years rather than generations.

Every one of these accelerations registers in the human nervous system as potential threat. Every disruption is another alarm. The fear brain, designed for occasional acute stress, is now running in a state of chronic activation. A brain locked in chronic fear cannot access the empathy, wisdom, and long-term thinking that complex problems require.

This is why the political polarization, the institutional breakdown, the resurgence of failed ideologies, and the collapse of social trust are all happening at once. They are not separate problems. They are the same problem expressing itself in different places — the fear brain's response to a world changing faster than we can biologically adapt to.

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# What You Can Actually Control

Here is what none of us can do: slow the pace of change. Reverse the fragmentation of our institutions. Silence the algorithms. Opt out of the century we were born into.

Here is what every one of us can do, starting today: choose which operating system we run.

The Stoics understood this two thousand years ago. The distinction they called the dichotomy of control — what is up to us and what is not — is the most practical idea in the history of human thought. What is not up to us: the economy, the news cycle, the behavior of our institutions, the choices of people we disagree with. What is up to us: how we interpret what happens, what we practice, who we choose to be in response to a world that is not going to cooperate.

The shift from fear to wisdom is not a personality trait. It is a practice. A trainable capacity. Something that changes, measurably, with deliberate effort. Which means the divide is not something that happens to us. It is something we participate in, and something we can choose, person by person, to transcend.

That choice does not stay contained. It compounds.

The person who learns to pause before reacting shows up differently at the dinner table. Different conversations happen in that family. That family belongs to a community whose texture gradually changes. Communities of people practicing wisdom rather than fear build institutions that function differently — schools, businesses, civic organizations, governments — because institutions are only ever as wise or as fearful as the people running them.

This is the arc Human Flourishing is built around: self, family, community, society. Not a slogan. A sequence. Change moves from the inside out, the way it always has.

It is also why we are not waiting for the institutions to fix themselves before beginning the work. The work begins with each person who decides that the quality of their own thinking, their own relationships, their own community is within their reach — regardless of how loud the world gets.

The world is not going to slow down. But the most consequential thing you can do for your family, your community, and the world you share with eight billion other human beings is to become someone who chooses wisely under pressure. That capacity is not fixed. It is not reserved for the exceptional. It can be learned, practiced, and grown — and it is more urgently needed, and more within reach, than most of us have ever been told.

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# When the Referees Become Players: The Failure of Our Institutions

Humanity built institutions precisely to protect us from our own fear brains. Science was designed to give us a shared method for arriving at truth that transcended tribal preference. Universities were designed to be the places where hard questions got asked across ideological lines. Journalism was designed to hold power accountable through disciplined, fact-based inquiry. Government, at its best, was designed to protect individual freedom and create the conditions for human beings to flourish.

Something has gone profoundly wrong. Too many of the institutions built to be our referees have become players. Significant parts of the scientific establishment are increasingly perceived as vehicles for ideological conclusions dressed in methodological clothing. Many universities, which should be the most intellectually diverse environments on earth, have become among the most ideologically monolithic institutions in modern society. The professional and funding pressures of academic life too often stop researchers short of the conclusions their evidence demands. Much of mainstream journalism has abandoned the aspiration to shared factual reality and fragmented into competing partisan narratives. Many government agencies that once commanded broad public trust have been politicized to the point where their pronouncements are filtered immediately through tribal lenses.

The deeper tragedy is that these failures leave ordinary people without a trusted arbiter at exactly the moment one is most needed. When science becomes politicized, people stop trusting scientists. When universities enforce ideological conformity, they lose the authority to speak to anyone outside that ideology. When journalism becomes advocacy, citizens no longer know where to find unbiased truth. The vacuum left by failing institutions does not remain empty. It fills with fear, conspiracy, and the seductive certainty of demagogues who offer simple answers to complex questions.

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## Many Voices, No Movement: Why Human Flourishing Is Needed

There is no shortage of people and organizations working on pieces of this problem, and the work they are doing matters.

Heroic, the most ambitious individual flourishing platform ever built, is helping hundreds of thousands of people access their highest capabilities through the integration of ancient wisdom and modern science. Positive Intelligence is giving people practical, neuroscience-based tools to shift from fear to wisdom in real time. Academic centers at many of

the world's leading universities are generating important research on the measurable dimensions of human wellbeing — including Martin Seligman, whose decades of work at the University of Pennsylvania established the scientific foundations for positive psychology and whose PERMA model remains one of the most rigorous frameworks ever developed for understanding what flourishing actually requires. The Conscious Capitalism movement is demonstrating that business can be a profound force for good. Faith communities around the world are sustaining the practices and relationships that have always been the foundation of human flourishing.

Each of these efforts has a natural boundary. The Heroic platform is built for individual transformation. By design, it does not address the structural and institutional conditions that determine whether billions of people have any realistic access to flourishing in the first place. Academic research centers produce vital knowledge, but the nature of academic work — its specialized focus, professional norms, and institutional rhythms — means findings often remain within scholarly circles rather than entering the broader public conversation where they are most needed. The Conscious Capitalism movement is transforming how business leaders think, but it remains, fundamentally, a business movement.

What is missing is a different kind of organization entirely. Not one that replaces these efforts, but one that connects and amplifies them while doing something few of them are positioned to do: wading into the hard questions with intellectual honesty, following the evidence wherever it leads, and saying clearly and publicly what the full picture of human flourishing actually requires. An organization committed to building genuine community across ideological lines, motivating individuals and institutions toward wiser choices, and creating the conditions for change that compounds, from the inside out, at every level of society.

Questions like: What does the evidence actually say about the relationship between economic freedom and human flourishing? What does the research on family structure tell us, honestly and without ideological filtering, about the conditions children need to thrive? What forms of governance have historically produced the conditions for human beings to live well? What does the convergence of ancient wisdom and modern neuroscience tell us about the practices and institutions a flourishing society must have?

These questions have answers in the evidence. They are not being asked with sufficient honesty, courage, or civility by organizations with the credibility and independence to be heard across ideological lines. Human Flourishing is designed to ask them, with rigor, with respect for every voice at the table, and with the conviction that honest inquiry conducted in good faith is the only path to answers that can hold across difference. And to amplify every serious voice — from every tradition, every discipline, every perspective — working on the answers.

# What We Are Doing to Our Children

If the accelerating pace of change and the dominance of the fear brain pose serious challenges for adults with fully developed prefrontal cortices and decades of lived experience, what are they doing to children whose brains will not finish developing until their mid-twenties?

We have handed our children devices more powerful than the most advanced computers of a generation ago, connected them to a global network of billions of strangers, exposed them to the unfiltered reality of human nature in all its beauty and cruelty, and then wondered why anxiety, depression, and suicide rates among young people have reached crisis levels across the developed world. We have asked them to navigate a world that changes faster than they can develop the cognitive and emotional tools to process it, inside nervous systems that are still being formed.

And we are watching what happens on the other side of that. A young man we know, an engineering student working in fiber tech, recently rode through traffic with his coworkers and passed a group of political protestors. One of the coworkers dismissed the protestors with a slur. The young man asked, mildly, why he would say that. The coworker fired back: “What, do you believe everything you read?” The young man wanted to ask exactly the same question in return — that is the question I wanted to ask you — because it was the honest one, and because it cut both ways. He did not ask it. He knew what would happen if he did. He knew the social cost of turning the question around was higher than the value of the answer. So he stayed quiet and rode the rest of the way to the job site in silence.

That is what it looks like when a generation is not taught how to sit with disagreement. The tragedy is not that the coworker asked the wrong question. He asked the right one. He just asked it as a weapon, in a form that made it impossible to answer honestly. And the young man who saw the trap, who recognized the question cut both ways, who had the curiosity and the clarity to ask it back, chose silence — because silence was the only move the conversation had left him.

Children need both protection and preparation. Protection from the overwhelming complexity of the adult world during the years when foundational capabilities are being built. And preparation, gradual and age-appropriate and neuroscience-informed, for a world that will demand from them an extraordinary capacity to navigate uncertainty — and to ask the real question out loud — with wisdom rather than fear. Human Flourishing will return to this in a dedicated essay. For now it is enough to say that if we are serious about healing the divide, we must start with the generation that will either perpetuate it or transcend it.

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# The Urgent Responsibility of Business Leaders

Nowhere is the divide more consequential — or the opportunity more immediate — than in the world of business. Leaders today hold in their hands something profound: the daily working lives of the people entrusted to their organizations. Every decision ripples through families and communities. And leaders operating primarily from their fear brain — making reactive, short-term, threat-driven decisions — are not just risking business outcomes. They are shaping the inner lives of the people around them.

But the inverse is equally true, and far more hopeful. Bob Chapman built Barry-Wehmiller into a \$3 billion manufacturing company on the conviction that everybody matters. When the 2008 financial crisis hit, rather than laying off ten percent of the workforce, every employee took a furlough. The pain was shared rather than concentrated catastrophically on the most vulnerable. When COVID-19 nearly grounded the entire airline industry overnight, Delta Air Lines faced a similar choice. Rather than moving immediately to mass involuntary layoffs, Delta cut work hours across the company, offered voluntary leave to more than forty thousand employees, and negotiated with its pilots' union to avoid furloughs that other airlines were already announcing. The result, in both cases, was the same: deepened loyalty, organizational resilience, and proof that caring for people and building a thriving enterprise are not competing priorities. They are the same priority.

In a world of accelerating change, the businesses that will thrive are those that help their people shift from fear to wisdom. Not because it is the moral thing to do, though it is. But because organizations operating from collective wisdom innovate faster, adapt more effectively, retain better talent, and make decisions that hold up over time. Purpose-driven leadership is not soft capitalism. It is capitalism operating at its highest level — and it is one of the most powerful tools available for healing the divide from the inside out.

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## What Honest Inquiry Requires

The sections above describe a world under pressure. A world accelerating faster than human beings can adapt, operating increasingly from fear, served by institutions that are losing the capacity for the honest inquiry they were built to protect. They also describe something more hopeful: that the most consequential lever available to any of us is the one closest to home. Our own choices. Our own practices. Our own communities.

Honest inquiry into human flourishing cannot stop there. It must be willing to follow the evidence into harder territory, asking serious questions about the economic, civic, and so-

cial conditions that either allow flourishing to take root or prevent it from ever beginning. These are not questions with simple answers. They are questions that thoughtful people across every tradition, discipline, and ideological perspective have wrestled with seriously, and that too few organizations are positioned to ask publicly, rigorously, and without predetermined conclusions.

Human Flourishing is committed to asking them. What follows are not verdicts. They are the questions we believe honest inquiry demands — questions that will each receive their own dedicated essay, their own evidence, and their own invitation to push back, add nuance, and follow the argument wherever it leads.

### ***Flourishing Is a Science, Not Merely a Philosophy***

*What does science actually tell us about what allows human beings to thrive — and does that science hold across cultures, contexts, and centuries of human experience?*

The answer, increasingly, is yes. The science of human thriving is real, measurable, and cross-cultural. Researchers across psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and medicine, at institutions spanning every continent, have spent decades asking what conditions allow human beings to live well. Their findings converge with remarkable consistency: sleep, movement, social connection, mental fitness, and meaningful purpose produce measurable improvements in wellbeing across every culture and context, because they work through universal biological and neurological mechanisms.

This convergence is not accidental. It reflects something deep about what human beings actually are — creatures with shared needs, shared capacities, and a shared potential for flourishing that transcends the boundaries of nation, ideology, and tradition. The frameworks that have emerged from this research, from positive psychology to self-determination theory to the growing science of meaning and purpose, are not Western inventions imposed on a diverse world. They are descriptions of human nature that the evidence keeps confirming, in study after study, across cultures and contexts.

Flourishing is not a philosophical opinion. It is a scientific reality that can be studied, taught, and applied with the same rigor we bring to medicine or engineering. It belongs to everyone.

### ***Fear and Love: The Deepest Driver of Human Behavior***

*What if the deepest divide in human experience has nothing to do with politics, ideology, or culture, and everything to do with a choice each of us makes, moment by moment?*

The deepest driver of human behavior, individually and collectively, is the choice between fear and love. Fear contracts, divides, and diminishes. It turns neighbors into threats, complexity into enemies, and uncertainty into catastrophe. Operating from fear, we make worse decisions, form shallower connections, and treat others as instruments of our own security rather than as ends in themselves.

Love expands, creates, and elevates. Operating from love — the neurological state of empathy, curiosity, and genuine connection — we access our full human capacity. We can

hold complexity without collapsing. We can engage across difference without hostility. We can face an uncertain future with wisdom rather than dread. This is the central, overarching challenge of our time: to help more human beings, individually and collectively, develop the practiced, sustainable capacity to choose love over fear.

### ***Economic Freedom and Human Flourishing***

*One of the most important questions honest inquiry into human flourishing must ask is this: what has actually worked, at scale, to lift human beings out of poverty?*

The evidence is worth sitting with seriously. Since 1990, extreme global poverty has declined from 36% of humanity to under 10%, one of the most significant improvements in human welfare in recorded history. Understanding what produced that change, and what conditions allow it to continue, is not an ideological question. It is one of the most practical questions a movement committed to flourishing at scale can ask.

There is also something worth exploring at a deeper level: the relationship between economic freedom and human dignity. Voluntary exchange — two people freely choosing to transact — is a mutual affirmation. At its core, it is a love-based architecture. What that means for how we structure economies, how we think about entrepreneurship, and how business can be a force for genuine human good are questions Human Flourishing intends to take seriously, without flinching from where the evidence leads.

Conscious Capitalism — business driven by genuine purpose and care for all stakeholders — represents one compelling vision of what that looks like in practice. It is not the only lens, but it is a serious one, and it points toward something important: how we do business is never separate from how we treat each other.

### ***Basic Needs Are the Essential Foundation***

*Can we speak honestly about human flourishing without first asking who has any realistic access to it?*

Flourishing is not a luxury for those who have already escaped want. The roughly 800 million people who still live in extreme poverty are not on the margins of the human flourishing conversation. They are its most urgent subject. Food, shelter, safety, and belonging are prerequisites, not aspirations. A person who does not know where their next meal comes from cannot meaningfully engage with the question of purpose. A child growing up in violence cannot develop the neural architecture of wisdom. The evidence on what actually solves this is unambiguous: economic freedom and entrepreneurship, as described above, are among the most powerful tools humanity has ever found for meeting these foundational needs at scale. Poverty is not an abstraction. It is the most immediate barrier between billions of human beings and the possibility of flourishing, and Human Flourishing refuses to treat their liberation as an afterthought.

### ***Governance and the Conditions for Flourishing***

*What structures, what protections, and what freedoms have historically allowed human beings to*

*thrive — and what does honest inquiry tell us about the conditions that make flourishing possible at a societal level?*

If flourishing begins with the individual — with the inner choice to operate from wisdom rather than fear — it does not end there. The conditions in which people live either support that choice or undermine it, which means honest inquiry into human flourishing cannot avoid asking hard questions about governance. These are questions that deserve to be asked with the same civility and respect for every voice at the table that Human Flourishing is committed to modeling.

One answer emerges clearly from the evidence, and it crosses ideological lines: the freedom to speak, question, and dissent is not a political preference. It is a prerequisite. Without the freedom to reason openly across difference, to challenge prevailing assumptions, to follow evidence wherever it leads, honest inquiry is impossible. Fear fills every silence that power enforces. This is as true in a corporation as it is in a country, as true on a university campus as it is in a legislature. Human Flourishing is built on the conviction that free expression is not one value among many. It is the condition that makes all the others possible.

Beyond free speech, the relationship between governance and human flourishing raises questions serious inquiry demands we ask honestly. What has history shown about the effects of concentrated versus distributed power on human welfare? What conditions — legal, economic, civic — have reliably produced environments where people can build lives of meaning and purpose? What does the evidence say about the relationship between individual freedom and collective flourishing?

These are not questions with simple answers. They are questions that thoughtful people across every political tradition have wrestled with seriously, and that Human Flourishing intends to bring into honest, rigorous, cross-ideological conversation. Not to score points. Not to relitigate the past. The stakes for getting governance right are too high to leave the conversation to any single tradition, ideology, or interest. The quality of that conversation — its civility, its rigor, its genuine openness to every perspective — matters as much as the conclusions it reaches.

### ***Family, Belonging, and the Communities We Need***

*Where does flourishing actually begin — and what does the evidence tell us about the conditions every child deserves?*

Flourishing is not a solo project. It never has been. The research on this is among the most consistent in all of social science: human beings who experience stable, loving relationships in their earliest years — who know what it feels like to be trusted, supported, and loved across time — develop the neural foundations that make wisdom, resilience, and genuine connection possible throughout their lives.

What those relationships look like varies. How they are structured across cultures, traditions, and circumstances is genuinely diverse. What the evidence consistently points to is not a single model but a quality: the presence of committed, caring adults who show up

reliably for the children in their lives. That is the foundation. It is a foundation that families of every kind are capable of providing, and that every child deserves.

Beyond the family, human beings need community. Not the curated, screen-mediated simulation of connection that dominates modern life, but the real thing: relationships of genuine trust and shared commitment, built over time, in physical proximity, around common purpose. When that belonging is absent — when community institutions have eroded and social interaction moves entirely onto platforms optimized for engagement rather than connection — the fear brain fills the vacuum. Isolation is not just lonely. Neurologically, it is a threat state. A society of people living in chronic threat states is exactly what we are increasingly becoming.

Human Flourishing is committed to asking honestly what conditions allow families and communities to thrive, and to building, through its own convenings and connections, the kind of genuine community it believes the world needs more of. Not a return to any idealized past. A serious, evidence-informed commitment to the conditions that allow human beings to belong to each other across difference, across time, and across the inevitable difficulties of a shared life.

### ***Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science Point to the Same Truths***

*What happens when the oldest human wisdom and the newest science point in exactly the same direction?*

The great wisdom traditions of human history were doing what we would today call applied research — testing practices across generations and cultures, observing which ones produced which outcomes, and refining the results. Modern neuroscience is now confirming, with imaging technology and reproducible experiments, what the wisest human beings across history discovered through practice. This convergence is one of the most hopeful facts of our time. We have an enormous inheritance of tested wisdom about how to live well, and the scientific tools to understand why it works and teach it efficiently.

What makes this convergence so remarkable is that it happened across traditions that disagreed profoundly about theology, cosmology, and metaphysics, and yet arrived at shared truths about how human beings flourish. That is not coincidence. It is a model for how serious inquiry can work when it is conducted with genuine humility, curiosity, and respect for wisdom wherever it is found, regardless of the tradition, culture, or century from which it comes. That is how Human Flourishing intends to operate: drawing from the full range of human wisdom, honoring every tradition that has something serious to contribute, and remaining captured by none.

### ***Hard Conversations Are Essential to Progress***

*What if the most radical thing we could do right now is simply to talk to each other — honestly, courageously, and with genuine respect?*

The fear brain avoids discomfort. A culture dominated by fear brains cannot have the honest conversations that genuine progress requires. Human Flourishing is committed to the harder path: engaging seriously across difference, following evidence where it leads even when that is uncomfortable, and refusing to let the desire for social approval override the obligation to honesty. Which means being willing to say things that prominent institutions, captured by the same tribal dynamics they were designed to transcend, are no longer willing to say.

Intellectual courage without civility is just another form of combat. What Human Flourishing is committed to modeling is something rarer and more difficult: honest inquiry and genuine respect for every person across the table, held at the same time. Not agreement. Not the flattening of real differences. The deep conviction that the person who sees the world differently than you do has something worth understanding, and that the quality of how we engage matters as much as the conclusions we reach. Intellectual courage and genuine love for the people across the table, held simultaneously. That is what genuine dialogue looks like, and it is what Human Flourishing is committed to modeling in every essay, every convening, every conversation.

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## The Coming Fork in the Road

Artificial intelligence is arriving into a world already struggling with fear-driven polarization, eroding institutions, and a deepening crisis of trust, and largely operating from its fear brain at the very moment it needs its wisdom most. That is a genuine danger. The same technology that could amplify human capability in medicine, in science, in creativity, at a scale we are only beginning to comprehend could, if applied with fear-based thinking, become an instrument of surveillance, manipulation, and control at unprecedented scale. The question is not what AI will do. The question is which operating system — fear or wisdom — humanity will be running when we make the choices that shape its direction.

There is another possibility. A civilization that has learned, deliberately and at scale, to access its wisdom brain is a civilization capable of stewarding extraordinary power responsibly. The same platforms that currently amplify fear could amplify wisdom. The same AI systems being built today could be designed, from the ground up, around the science of human flourishing rather than the economics of engagement. That flourishing future is not inevitable. But it is possible. And whether we reach it depends, in the most direct way, on how many human beings learn to operate from wisdom rather than fear in the years immediately ahead.

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# The Choice Before Us

We face a choice that will define this century. We can continue responding to an accelerating world with our fear brains — fracturing into hostile tribes, paralyzed by anxiety, retreating into the false comfort of simple answers and strong leaders who promise to make the complexity stop. This path leads to suffering at best and to something far darker at worst.

Or we can accept the profound challenge before us: learning to operate from love rather than fear, from wisdom rather than reaction, from genuine curiosity about the person across the divide rather than the reflexive certainty that they are an enemy.

This is not naive optimism. It is evolutionary necessity. And for the first time in human history, we have both the understanding and the tools to pursue it at scale. Ancient wisdom confirmed and enriched by modern neuroscience. Practical methods that allow people to make the shift from fear to love not as an aspiration but as a trained and sustainable capacity.

The world is not going to slow down. The fear brain will keep receiving new material to work with. The institutions we built to protect us will keep struggling. AI will keep evolving, with all of its extraordinary and terrifying possibilities.

What can change is our operating system. What can change is whether enough human beings — in enough communities, institutions, and positions of influence — learn to choose love over fear with enough consistency to shift the direction of the whole.

That is the work. It begins with each of us. It scales through movements willing to consider the whole picture honestly and to build the bridge between where we are and where we are capable of going.

*Something is tearing us apart. We know what it is.  
And we know what can heal it.*

**That is why Human Flourishing exists. And why the time is now.**

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# Join the Movement

Read the Human Flourishing Pledge at [humanflourishing.us](http://humanflourishing.us) — a shared declaration of commitment to honest inquiry, intellectual courage, and the kind of thinking and engaging that a flourishing society requires. Sign it if it speaks to you.

This essay is the first in a series. Each founding belief introduced here will be explored in depth in essays to follow: on free enterprise and poverty, on family and community, on governance, on the science of flourishing, on what our institutions owe us and what we owe them. The conversation is just beginning.

If you want to engage — to push back, to add your voice, to bring a perspective this essay has missed — reach out. Human Flourishing is designed to be a movement, not a monologue.

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## *Scott McIntosh*

**Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | MAC6 | Conscious Capitalism Arizona**

Scott McIntosh is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur who built McIntosh Engineering to \$50 million in revenue before co-founding MAC<sup>6</sup>, a thriving entrepreneurial community in Tempe, Arizona. He co-founded Conscious Capitalism Arizona as the third chapter globally and has been among the earliest investors and advocates for Heroic Public Benefit Corporation. A certified Positive Intelligence coach, longtime student of Stoic philosophy and ancient wisdom, and grandfather of four, Scott writes and speaks at the intersection of human flourishing, free enterprise, and the urgent questions that define our moment. This is the founding essay of Human Flourishing — the first in a series dedicated to exploring, honestly and without retreat, what it actually takes for human beings to thrive.

## *Angela McIllece*

**Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | Founder, Soul Force Strategies**

Angela McIllece is a creative strategist, coach, and designer, and the founder of Soul Force Strategies. Drawing on her background in creative design, personal development philosophy, and community building, Angela works at the intersection of vision and execution, helping individuals and organizations clarify their identity and build with intention. As a military spouse for thirty years, Angela has lived and worked across cultures, including New Delhi, India and Bogotá, Colombia, raising young children abroad and traveling widely throughout Asia and Latin America, and the United States. These experiences shaped her deeply held belief that human flourishing is both universal and beautifully particular, expressed differently across cultures but rooted in the same enduring human needs.

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[humanflourishing.us](http://humanflourishing.us)

## Sources and Further Reading

This essay draws from a wider conversation about human flourishing, the neuroscience of behavior, and the conditions that allow individuals and societies to thrive. The works below represent some of the thinking, research, and evidence that shaped this founding statement. They are offered not as comprehensive citation but as starting points for readers who want to go deeper.

### *On the science of flourishing and the fear–wisdom distinction*

Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (Free Press, 2011). Foundational work on the PERMA model and positive psychology as a measurable science.

Shirzad Chamine, *Positive Intelligence: Why Only 20% of Teams and Individuals Achieve Their True Potential* (Greenleaf, 2012). Accessible framework for the Saboteur-and-Sage dynamic described in this essay.

Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin, 2024). Primary reference for the claims about accelerating harm to young people.

### *On business, economic freedom, and the conditions for flourishing*

Bob Chapman and Raj Sisodia, *Everybody Matters: The Extraordinary Power of Caring for Your People Like Family* (Portfolio, 2015). Source for the Barry-Wehmiller furlough example and the underlying philosophy.

Raj Sisodia, Jag Sheth, and David Wolfe, *Firms of Endearment: How World-Class Companies Profit from Passion and Purpose*, 2nd ed. (Pearson FT Press, 2014). Core text of the Conscious Capitalism movement.

### *On cross-ideological dialogue and moral understanding*

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012). Essential reading on how people across ideological lines come to hold the convictions they do.

### *On ancient wisdom, referenced throughout*

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*; Epictetus, *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*; Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*. Classical Stoic texts remain widely available in multiple translations.

### *Data and statistics referenced in the essay*

World Bank, *Poverty and Inequality Platform* ([pip.worldbank.org](http://pip.worldbank.org)). Source for extreme poverty data from 1990 forward, including the most recent 2025 updates.

Our World in Data, *Poverty* ([ourworldindata.org/poverty](http://ourworldindata.org/poverty)). Accessible synthesis of World Bank data and historical trends.

Similarweb and UBS, *ChatGPT User Adoption Analysis* (February 2023). Original source for the 100 million monthly active users in two months figure.