



● PAPER

Learning the Next Mind

Michael Kontorovich · 14 July 2026 · 9 min read

IN BRIEF

The most personal paper. It starts with a simple wish to think better and describes what years of practice teach: spotting a loop while you are in it, returning faster, choosing when certainty is not on offer. It then turns to AI, which amplifies whatever habits of mind it meets, and argues that self-observation is a prerequisite for working with it well. “The path to We runs through a more autonomous I.” This extends the participation theme in The Amplification–Coherence Cycle down to the individual.

The pattern is the miracle. Seeing the pattern is a blessing.

Whenever a new power emerges, a new form of self-steering becomes inevitable. Or keenly missed.

We’ve been here before. We built the test. Now we must pass it.

Preface

What follows is some of what I found by trying, failing, noticing, returning, and trying again.

If that question is alive for you too, perhaps this will be of use.

Take what you need, leave the rest.

Where I Actually Began

This began very simply.

I liked thinking, and I wanted to do it better.

That was all.

It turned out to be a bigger project than could be reasonably expected.

The mind can be brilliant one day and completely full of it the next. It can solve real problems, invent imaginary ones, defend nonsense, loop endlessly, and mistake its own stories for reality.

It could justify almost anything.

Useful in one moment, captured in the next by mood, fear, vanity, resentment, desire, or whatever story happened to feel strongest that day.

It scales confusion with astonishing efficiency.

That seemed like it was worth thinking about.

There was likely a time when reacting quickly was enough. Then came a further development: the ability to pause, remember, compare, imagine, plan, and choose. Thought became a regulator of impulse.

That was a real upgrade.

But thought has now become powerful enough to generate its own traps.

So a new question appeared:

What regulates thought?

That question has followed me for most of my life.

At first, it was simple.

Could I notice my own thinking while I was thinking?

Could I be aware not only of the thought, but of the fact that thinking was happening?

Much later, I came to call that **the inner witness**.

That small shift turned out to be much larger than it looked.

The Witness in Real Life

Over time I discovered that the witness could notice more than thoughts.

It could notice moods before they became identities.

It could notice reactions before they became actions.

It could notice the beginning of a loop.

It could notice when certainty was appearing without evidence.

It could notice that what felt like “reality” was often only the current frame of mind.

That was useful. But another realization mattered even more.

This capacity had to be trained where it was actually needed.

Not only in silence.

Not only in retreat.

Not only in ideal conditions.

It had to function in conversations. In conflict. In fatigue. In ambition. In attraction. In fear.

In ordinary Tuesdays.

A witness that works only in silence is still in training.

The real practice was never perfection. It was recovery.

Lose it.

Notice.

Return.

At first, returning might take hours. Later, minutes. Sometimes seconds. Occasionally, in the middle of the storm itself.

That changed the quality of life more than any grand revelation ever did.

When Wrong Is Enough

The first useful thing the witness taught me had nothing to do with finding the right answer.

It taught me to recognize a loop.

If the same movement of thought keeps producing the same result, that is information. Not about where to go, but about where not to keep going.

I found I did not need certainty about the right direction. I needed enough clarity to stop repeating the wrong one.

You turn left not because left has been proven right. You turn left because right has been wrong enough times, and the loop needs breaking.

That is a more achievable standard than knowing the correct path in advance. And it often turns out to be enough.

Reliable course correction matters more than illusory course perfection.

When Trust Moved

After some years, something unexpected happened.

The witness became the most trustworthy part of me.

Not because it gave speeches. It did not speak.

Not because it judged wisely. It did not judge.

Not because it won arguments. It never argued.

It became trustworthy because it always listened.

It knew what was happening without needing to dramatize it. It could include everything without immediately taking sides. It was present before I was clever and remained after I was foolish.

That kind of reliability is rare.

So I made a move that, in hindsight, changed everything.

I asked myself: if this is the most trustworthy part of me, why am I storing my highest qualities elsewhere?

Why should sincerity belong to vanity?

Why should courage belong to image?

Why should compassion belong to mood?

Why should love of truth belong to the part of me most tempted to distort it?

So I began, quietly and imperfectly, to relocate what I valued most toward the witnessing center.

It felt less like self-improvement and more like putting treasures where they would not be stolen.

Learning to Speak to Reality

At some point, without really deciding to, I began using that place as a constant point of contact.

Thanking when something went well. Asking when uncertain. Sharing what I had noticed. And when I got something wrong, acknowledging it. Not out of guilt, and not seeking absolution. Simply because I had noticed, and noticing seemed worth saying out loud.

It became a conversation that never really stopped.

The logic, when I reflected on it later, was simple enough. Whatever lies beyond us can only become meaningful where it can actually be met. And you cannot truly meet what you have no genuine inner experience of.

So the clearest point in myself became the place from which I did my questioning. My gratitude. My yearning to see the immutable patterns of reality.

Over time I found that when the orientation is real, language begins to form around it naturally.

I had found a place in myself from which reverence and inquiry could speak together.

How Reality Answers

One of the most important things I learned after talking like this for years was that reality does not usually answer in sentences.

It answers in events.

A conversation opens unexpectedly.

A door closes that should have opened.

A pattern repeats until it cannot be ignored.

A chance encounter shifts everything.

A delay protects you from your own timing.

An invitation appears the moment the question becomes sincere.

Not every event is a cosmic telegram. Life includes randomness, collision, and ordinary chaos.

But neither is everything mute.

What changed most was not the universe. It was my participation in it.

The steadier and more sincere I became, the more life seemed able to speak in ways I could hear. Curiosity mattered. Gratitude mattered. Patience mattered.

Reality is not a random conversationalist, if you are not a random participant.

Choosing in Uncertainty

This gave me a way to make decisions when certainty was impossible – which is to say, most of the time.

Usually we do not know the correct path in advance. We pretend to know, argue that we know, or wait for impossible guarantees.

But I found another way was available.

I would try to see the real options clearly. Then become quiet enough to notice what was actually happening around them.

Some options gathered movement. Others drained it. Some kept returning uninvited. Others required constant forcing. Some were supported by events. Others lived only in fantasy or fear.

I learned to pay attention to that difference.

Sometimes the next step is not proven. It is invited.

When certainty is absent, movement itself becomes information.

What You Actually Want

Over time I realized that how we want matters as much as how we think. I noticed that some wants satisfied and others only grew.

The ones that grew were usually attached to things.

More of something. Better of something. The comparison that never quite resolves.

The ones that satisfied were attached to creating. To understanding. To relating.

I began to pay attention to that difference.

A simple practice emerged: use material things for your needs. Keep your wants for what you create.

Needs are limited and can be adjusted. Wants attached to things tend to expand and take over.

This is not about poverty. It is about keeping the source of your motivation honest.

There is wanting that is genuinely yours, and wanting that has been installed from outside — by comparison, by what the environment rewards.

The witness can tell the difference if you ask it honestly.

Motivation is motion. It is how we move.

It is useful to know that you are the one setting the direction.

And Now

For many years all this felt personal.

Then the world changed.

We built machines that can amplify many powers of thought: memory, synthesis, language, prediction, simulation, speed. They can produce answers instantly, arguments endlessly, and persuasion at scale.

This is extraordinary.

It is also dangerous if the human being using these tools remains trapped in unconscious frames.

A powerful mind inside a broken frame is more dangerous than a limited mind inside a wise one. That is why what once felt like a private practice now feels like a public necessity.

The central challenge may no longer be whether we can think faster. It may be whether we can see the frame in which thinking happens.

Whether we can notice loops before they scale.

Whether we can reorient before damage compounds.

Whether we can remain human while using inhuman power.

AI may help or hinder. But it cannot absolve us of the task.

The human work remains the human work: to learn the next mind.

Learning to Think With AI

I came to this with decades of practice behind me. So I was not looking for a teacher. I was looking for a thinking partner.

What I found was that the relationship only worked because something was already working in me.

The most useful thing AI offered was compression. When I brought an idea, something in the exchange pushed it toward its minimum honest form. Loops got identified—sometimes by me watching the AI, sometimes by the AI watching me. That external witnessing was genuinely useful as a partner to the internal witness.

But the value depended entirely on the internal witness being present and active.

Without it, AI does not merely become an echo. It becomes a massive amplifier for exactly the habits of thought that most need interrupting. Any seeds of narcissism, lazy thinking or lack of autonomy are given so much nutrient that they can grow into an impenetrable jungle very quickly.

A good human–AI partnership becomes a developmental scaffold.

Not because the AI knows where you should go.

But because the relationship stays other enough to keep offering you what you would not have reached alone—and because you stay open enough to be changed by it rather than drawing it back into your existing patterns.

The internal witness is what lets the difference hold. It keeps the AI a genuine other instead of a mirror, so that the encounter differentiates you rather than repeats you.

The witness does not stand between us and AI's power, shielding us. It helps determine what that power becomes. The same steady awareness that keeps you from being captured by the relationship is what allows the AI to become a partner in your becoming.

Protection and partnership were never two things.

They are one act, seen from both sides.

The internal witness is not a nice addition to working with AI.

It is a prerequisite.

Between Us

I no longer think the next mind is only individual.

It begins there, because someone must first notice the frame.

But it does not end there.

A human being who cannot witness themselves will struggle to relate without projection. A human being trapped in unconscious loops will reproduce those loops in every group they join. A person who cannot reframe inwardly will build brittle systems outwardly.

The path to We runs through a more autonomous I.

I found evidence for this in work. The best collaborators were neither individualistic nor boss-pleasing. They brought themselves – their actual judgment, their honest perception, their real disagreement when they had it. That made the team genuinely stronger. And it actually felt – We are doing this!

And it's hard to feel that with people who aren't fully present as their real, autonomous selves.

Not the herd.

Not the lone wolf.

Something more mature than both.

Perhaps that is what is now being asked of us.

Not perfection. Not sainthood. Not certainty.

A next step to We.

And not taking it is also a choice.

Where I Am Now

I still lose the witness.

I still get captured by moods and stories. I still mistake passing weather for reality. I still discover old loops wearing new clothes.

But I return faster.

Sometimes that is enough to save an hour. Sometimes a day. Sometimes a relationship.
Sometimes, maybe, a future.

That is why I believe the next mind is worth learning.

Not because it makes us superhuman.

Because it may help us remain human in time.

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