

THANK YOU FOR BEING LATE

*An Optimist's Guide to Thriving
in the Age of Accelerations*

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ONE

Thank You for Being Late

Everyone goes into journalism for different reasons—and they're often idealistic ones. There are investigative journalists, beat reporters, breaking-news reporters, and explanatory journalists. I have always aspired to be the latter. I went into journalism because I love being a translator from English to English.

I enjoy taking a complex subject and trying to break it down so that I can understand it and then can help readers better understand it—that subject the Middle East, the environment, globalization, or American politics. Our democracy can work only if voters know how the world works, so they are able to make intelligent policy choices and are less apt to fall prey to demagogues, ideological zealots, or conspiracy buffs who may be confusing them at best or deliberately misleading them at worst. As I watched the 2016 presidential campaign unfold, the words of Marie Curie never rang more true to me or felt more relevant: "Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."

It's no surprise so many people feel fearful or unmoored these days. In this book, I will argue that we are living through one of the greatest inflection points in history—perhaps unequaled since Johannes Gensfleisch zur Laden zum Gutenberg, a German blacksmith and printer, launched the printing revolution in Europe, paving the way for the Reformation. The three largest forces on the planet—technology, globalization, and climate change—are all accelerating at once. As a result, so

many aspects of our societies, workplaces, and geopolitics are being reshaped and need to be reimaged.

When there is a change in the pace of change in so many realms at once, as we're now experiencing, it is easy to get overwhelmed by it all. As John E. Kelly III, IBM's senior vice president for cognitive solutions and IBM Research, once observed to me: "We live as human beings in a linear world—where distance, time, and velocity are linear." But the growth of technology today is on "an exponential curve. The only exponential we ever experience is when something is accelerating, like a car, or decelerating really suddenly with a hard braking. And when that happens you feel very uncertain and uncomfortable for a short period of time." Such an experience can also be exhilarating. You might think, "Wow, I just went from zero to sixty miles per hour in five seconds." But you wouldn't want to take a long trip like that. Yet that is exactly the trip we're on, argued Kelly: "The feeling being engendered now among a lot of people is that of always being in this state of acceleration."

In such a time, opting to pause and reflect, rather than panic or withdraw, is a necessity. It is not a luxury or a distraction—it is a way to increase the odds that you'll better understand, and engage productively with, the world around you.

How so? "When you press the pause button on a machine, it stops. But when you press the pause button on human beings they start," argues my friend and teacher Dov Seidman, author of the book *HOW* and CEO of LRN, which advises global businesses on ethics and leadership. "You start to reflect, you start to rethink your assumptions, you start to reimagine what is possible and, most importantly, you start to reconnect with your most deeply held beliefs. Once you've done that, you can begin to reimagine a better path."

But what matters most "is what you do in the pause," he added. "Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best: 'In each pause I hear the call.'"

Nothing sums up better what I am trying to do with this book—to pause, to get off the merry-go-round on which I've been spinning for so many years as a twice-a-week columnist for *The New York Times*, and to reflect more deeply on what seems to me to be a fundamental turning point in history.

I don't remember the exact date of my own personal declaration of independence from the whirlwind, but it was sometime in early 2015,

and it was totally serendipitous. I regularly meet friends and interview officials, analysts, or diplomats over breakfast in downtown Washington, D.C., near the *New York Times* bureau. It's my way of packing more learning into a day and not wasting breakfast by eating alone. Once in a while, though, with the D.C. traffic and subways in the morning always a crapshoot, my breakfast guests would arrive ten, fifteen, or even twenty minutes late. They would invariably arrive flustered, spilling out apologies as they sat down: "The Red Line subway was delayed . . ." "The Beltway was backed up . . ." "My alarm failed . . ." "My kid was sick . . ."

On one of those occasions, I realized I didn't care at all about my guest's tardiness, so I said: "No, no, please—don't apologize. In fact, you know what, thank you for being late!"

Because he was late, I explained, I had minted time for myself. I had "found" a few minutes to just sit and think. I was having fun eavesdropping on the couple at the next table (fascinating!) and people-watching the lobby (outrageous!). And, most important, in the pause, I had connected a couple of ideas I had been struggling with for days. So no apology was necessary. Hence: "Thank you for being late."

The first time, I just blurted out that response, not really thinking about it. But after another such encounter, I noticed that it felt good to have those few moments of unplanned-for, unscheduled time, and it wasn't just me who felt better! And I knew why. Like many others, I was beginning to feel overwhelmed and exhausted by the dizzying pace of change. I needed to give myself (and my guests) permission to just slow down; I needed permission to be alone with my thoughts—without having to tweet about them, take a picture of them, or share them with anyone. Each time I reassured my guests that their lateness was not a problem, they would give me a quizzical look at first, but then a lightbulb would suddenly go on in their heads and they would say something like: "I know what you mean . . ." "Thank you for being late! Hey, you're welcome."

In his sobering book *Sabbath*, the minister and author Wayne Muller observes how often people say to him, "I am so busy." "We say this to one another with no small degree of pride," Muller writes, "as if our exhaustion were a trophy, our ability to withstand stress a mark of real character . . . To be unavailable to our friends and family, to be unable to find time for the sunset (or even to know when the sun has set at

all), to whiz through our obligations without time for a single, mindful breath; this has become a model of a successful life.”

I’d rather learn to pause. As the editor and writer Leon Wieseltier said to me once: technologists want us to think that patience became a virtue only because in the past “we had no choice”—we had to wait longer for things because our modems were too slow or our broadband hadn’t been installed, or because we hadn’t upgraded to the iPhone 7. “And so now that we have made waiting technologically obsolete,” added Wieseltier, “their attitude is: ‘Who needs patience anymore?’ But the ancients believed that there was wisdom in patience and that wisdom comes from patience . . . Patience wasn’t just the absence of speed. It was space for reflection and thought.” We are generating more information and knowledge than ever today, “but knowledge is only good if you can reflect on it.”

And it is not just knowledge that is improved by pausing. So, too, is the ability to build trust, “to form deeper and better connections, not just fast ones, with other human beings,” adds Seidman. “Our ability to forge deep relationships—to love, to care, to hope, to trust, and to build voluntary communities based on shared values—is one of the most uniquely human capacities we have. It is the single most important thing that differentiates us from nature and machines. Not everything is better faster or meant to go faster. I am built to think about my grandchildren. I am not a cheetah.”

It is probably no accident, therefore, that what sparked this book was a pause—a chance encounter I had in, of all places, a parking garage, and my decision not to rush off as usual but to engage with a stranger who approached me with an unusual request.

The Parking Attendant

It was early October 2014. I had driven my car from my home in Bethesda to the downtown there and parked in the public parking garage beneath the Hyatt Regency hotel, where I was meeting a friend at the Daily Grill for breakfast. As required, I got a time-stamped ticket when I arrived. After breakfast, I located my car in the garage and headed for the exit. I drove up to the cashier’s booth and handed the man there my ticket, but before studying it, he studied me.

“I know who you are,” said the elderly gentleman with a foreign accent and a warm smile.

“Great,” I hurriedly responded.

“I read your column,” he said.

“Great,” I responded, itching to be on my way home.

“I don’t always agree,” he said.

“Great,” I responded. “It means you always have to check.”

We exchanged a few more pleasantries; he gave me my change and I drove off, thinking: “It’s nice to know the parking guy reads my column in *The New York Times*.”

About a week later, I parked in the same garage, as I do roughly once a week to catch the Red Line subway to downtown D.C. from the Bethesda Metro station. I got the same time-stamped ticket, I took the subway to Washington, I spent the day at my office, and I took the Metro back. Then I went down to the garage, located my car, and headed for the exit—and encountered the same attendant in the booth.

I handed him my time-stamped ticket, but this time, before he handed me my change, he said: “Mr. Friedman, I write, too. I have my own blog. Would you look at it?”

“How can I find it?” I asked. He then wrote down the Web address on a small piece of white paper normally used to print out receipts. It said “odanabi.com,” and he handed it to me with my change.

I drove off, curious to check it out. But along the way my mind quickly drifted to other thoughts, like: “Holy mackerel! *The parking guy is now my competitor!* The parking guy has his own blog! He’s a columnist, too! What’s going on here?”

So I got home and called up his website. It was in English and focused on political and economic issues in Ethiopia, where he was from. It concentrated on relations among different ethnic and religious communities, the Ethiopian government’s undemocratic actions, and some of the World Bank’s activities in Africa. The blog was well designed and displayed a strong pro-democracy bent. The English was good but not perfect. The subject didn’t greatly interest me, though, so I didn’t spend a lot of time on the site.

But over the next week I kept thinking about this guy: How did he get into blogging? What did it say about our world that such an obviously educated man works as a parking cashier by day but has his own blog by

night, a platform that enables him to participate in a global dialogue and tell the whole world about the issues that animate him, that is, Ethiopian democracy and society?

I decided I needed to pause—and learn more about him. The only problem was that I didn't have his personal e-mail, so the only way for me to contact him was to take the subway to work every day and park in the public garage to see if, by chance, I could bump into him again. And that's what I did.

After several days of coming up empty, I was rewarded when one morning I arrived very early and my blogger-parker was there in the cashier's booth. I stopped at the ticket machine, put my car into park, got out, and waved to him.

"Hey, it's Mr. Friedman again," I said. "Can I have your e-mail address? I want to talk to you."

He found a scrap of paper and wrote it down for me. His full name, I discovered, was Ayele Z. Bojia. That same evening I e-mailed him and asked him to tell me a little bit about his background and when he started blogging. I told him I was thinking of writing a book on writing about the twenty-first century and I was interested in how other people got into the blogging/opinion-writing universe.

He e-mailed me back on November 1, 2014: "I consider the first article I posted on Odanabi.com is also the first day I start blogging . . . Of course, if the question is also about what motivates me doing that, there are quite a good number of issues that bother me back home in my country of origin—Ethiopia—on which I would like to reflect my personal perspectives. I hope you would excuse me if I am not able to instantaneously respond to your message as I am doing that in between work. Ayele."

On November 3, I e-mailed him again: "What were you doing in Ethiopia before you came here and what are the issues that bother you most? No rush. Thanks, Tom."

And the same day he wrote back: "Great. I see a big reciprocity here. You are interested to know what issues bother me most while I am interested to learn from you how I can best communicate those issues of my concern to my target constituency and the larger public."

To which I immediately answered: "Ayele, You have a deal! Tom." I promised to share with him all that I could about how to write a col-

umn, if he would tell me his life story. He immediately agreed, and we set a date. Two weeks later I came from my office in downtown D.C., near the White House, and Bojia came up from his parking garage, and we met nearby at Peet's Coffee & Tea in Bethesda. He was sitting at a small table by the window. He had salt-and-pepper hair and a mustache and wore a green wool scarf wrapped around his neck. He began by telling me his story of how he became an opinion writer—and then I told him mine—as we each sipped Peet's finest brew.

Bojia, who was sixty-three when we first met, explained that he'd graduated with a BA in economics from Haile Selassie I University, named after the longtime Ethiopian emperor. He is an Orthodox Christian and an Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, with its own distinct language. Dating back from his time as a campus Oromo activist, he explained, he'd been promoting the culture and aspirations of the Oromo people in the context of a democratic Ethiopia.

"All my effort is geared towards making it possible for all peoples of Ethiopia to be proud of whatever nationality they belong to and be a proud Ethiopian by citizenship," Bojia explained. Those efforts drew the ire of the Ethiopian regime and forced him into political exile in 2004.

Bojia, who bore himself with the dignity of an educated immigrant whose day job was just to earn money so he could seriously blog at night, added: "I am not trying to write for the writing sake. I want to learn the techniques. [But] I have a cause to promote."

He named his blog Odanabi.com after a town in Ethiopia near the capital, Addis Ababa. The town is currently being touted to become the administrative and cultural seat of the Oromia regional government. He explained that he began his writing career on various Ethiopian Web platforms—Nazret.com, Ayyaanntu.net, AddisVoice.com, and Gadaa.com, an Oromo site, but their pace and his eagerness to participate in ongoing debates did not match: "I am appreciative of those websites, which gave me an opportunity to express my views, but the process was just too slow." So, he explained, as "a person working at the parking garage with certain financial constraints, I had to open this website [of my own] to have this regular outlet for myself." His site is hosted by Bluehost.com for a small fee.

The political field in Ethiopia is dominated by extremes, Bojia added: "There is no middle ground open to reason." One of the things

that impressed him about America and that he wanted to bring to Ethiopia was the way “people stand for their rights, but also see the other guy’s points of view.” (Maybe you have to be a foreigner from a divided land working in an underground parking garage to see today’s America as a country where arguments are bringing people closer, but I loved his optimism!)

He may just be in the cashier’s booth making change, he told me, but he’s always trying to observe people and how they express themselves and convey their opinions. “Before I came here I never heard of Tim Russert,” Bojia said of the late, great *Meet the Press* host. “I don’t know him, but when I started following [his program] it was kind of infectious for me. When he engages he doesn’t push people in an extreme way. He is merciless in presentation of his facts and very respectful to others’ feeling.” As a result, Bojia concluded, “by the time he is finished every discussion you feel that he gave us some information”—and triggered something in the mind of the person he interviewed. Tim would have liked that.

Does he know how many people read his blog? I asked.

“From month to month it fluctuates with the issue, but there is a steady audience out there,” he informed me, adding that the Web metrics he uses suggest that he is being read in around thirty different countries. But then he added: “If there is any way you can help me manage my website, I will be extremely happy.” The thirty-five hours a week he’d spent over the last eight years working in the parking garage were just for “subsistence—my website is where my energy is.”

I promised to do what I could to help. Who could resist a parking attendant who knows his Web metrics! But I had to ask: “What’s it like for you—parking attendant by day, Web activist by night—to have your own global blog, while sitting in Washington and reaching people in thirty countries”—even if the numbers are small?

“I feel like I am a little bit empowered at this time,” Bojia answered without hesitation. “These days I kind of regret that I wasted my time. I would have started some three or four years ago, and not sent stuff here and there. Had I concentrated on developing my own blog by now I would have a bigger audience . . . I have a deep satisfaction from what I am doing. I am doing something positive that helps my country.”

Heating and Lighting

So over the next few weeks I e-mailed Bojia two memos on how I went about constructing a column, and I followed up with another meeting at Peet’s coffee shop to make certain that he understood what I was trying to say. I can’t say how much it helped him, but I learned an enormous amount from our encounters—more than I ever anticipated.

For starters, just entering Bojia’s world a tiny bit was an eye-opener. A decade ago the two of us would have had little in common, and now we were colleagues of sorts. Each of us was on a journey to bring our priorities to a wider audience, to participate in the global discussion and to tilt the world our way. We were both also part of a bigger trend. “We have never seen a time when more people could make history, record history, publicize history, and amplify history all at the same time,” remarked Dov Seidman. In previous epochs, “to make history you needed an army, to record it you needed a film studio or a newspaper, to publicize it you needed a publicist. Now anyone can start a wave. Now anyone can make history with a keystroke.”

And Bojia was doing just that. Artists and writers have moonlighted from time immemorial. What is new today is how many can now moonlight, how many others they can now touch from the moonlight if what they write is compelling, how fast they can go global if they prove they have something to say, and how little money it now costs to do so.

To live up to my side of the bargain with Bojia, I had to think more deeply about the craft of opinion writing than I had ever done before. I had been a columnist for nearly twenty years when we met, after being a reporter for seventeen years, and our encounter forced me to pause and put into words the difference between reporting and opinion writing and what actually makes a column “work.”

In my two memos to Bojia I explained that there is no set formula for writing a column, no class you attend, and that everyone does it differently to some degree. But there were some general guidelines I could offer. When you are a reporter, your focus is on digging up facts to explain the visible and the complex and to unearth and expose the impenetrable and the hidden—wherever that takes you. You are there to inform, without fear or favor. Straight news often has enormous influence,

but it's always in direct proportion to how much it informs, exposes, and explains.

Opinion writing is different. When you are a columnist, or a blogger in Bojia's case, your purpose is to influence or provoke a reaction and not just to inform—to argue for a certain perspective so compellingly that you persuade your readers to think or feel differently or more strongly or afresh about an issue.

That is why, I explained to Bojia, as a columnist, "I am either in the heating business or the lighting business." Every column or blog has to either turn on a lightbulb in your reader's head—illuminate an issue in a way that will inspire them to look at it anew—or stoke an emotion in your reader's heart that prompts them to feel or act more intensely or differently about an issue. The ideal column does both.

And you can immediately tell when it does—by how readers react. They might say "I didn't know that." That's a good reaction. It means you created some light. "I never looked at the issue that way." You created more light. "I never connected those things." More light. Then there's the columnist's favorite. It happens four times a year: "You said exactly what I felt but didn't know how to say—God bless you." And then there's also: "I want you fired. You're a moron. Who gave you this job? I will dance on your pink slip. I have canceled my subscription." You created heat . . .

But how do you go about generating heat or light? Where do opinions come from? I am sure every opinion writer would offer a different answer. My short one is that a column idea can spring from anywhere: a newspaper headline that strikes you as odd, a simple gesture by a stranger, the moving speech of a leader, the naïve question of a child, the cruelty of a school shooter, the wrenching tale of a refugee. Everything and anything is raw fodder for creating heat or light. It all depends on the connections you make and insights you surface to buttress your opinion.

More broadly speaking, though, I told Bojia, column writing is an act of chemistry—precisely because you must conjure it up yourself. A column doesn't write itself the way a breaking news story does. A column has to be created.

This act of chemistry usually involves mixing three basic ingredients: your own values, priorities, and aspirations; how you think the big-

gest forces, the world's biggest gears and pulleys, are shaping events; and what you've learned about people and culture—how they react or don't—when the big forces impact them.

When I say your own values, priorities, and aspirations, I mean the things that you care about most and aspire to see implemented most intensely. That value set helps you determine what is important and worth opining about, as well as what you will say. It is okay to change your mind as an opinion writer; what is not okay is to have no mind—to stand for nothing, or for everything, or only for easy and safe things. An opinion writer has to emerge from some framework of values that shapes his or her thinking about what should be supported or opposed. Are you a capitalist, a communist, a libertarian, a Keynesian, a conservative, a liberal, a neocon, or a Marxist?

When I refer to the world's big gears and pulleys, I am talking about what I call "the Machine." (Hat tip to Ray Dalio, the renowned hedge fund investor, who describes the economy as "a machine.") To be an opinion writer, you also always need to be carrying around a working hypothesis of how you think the Machine works—because your basic goal is to take your values and push the Machine in their direction. If you don't have a theory about how the Machine works, you'll either push it in a direction that doesn't accord with your beliefs or you won't move it at all.

And when I say people and culture, I mean how different peoples and cultures are affected by the Machine when it moves and how they, in turn, affect the Machine when they react. Ultimately columns are about people—the crazy things they say, do, hate, and hope for. I like to collect data to inform columns—but never forget: talking to another human being is also data. The columns that get the most response are almost always the ones about people, not numbers. Also, never forget that the best-selling book of all time is a collection of stories about people. It's called the Bible.

I argued to Bojia that the most effective columns emerge from mixing and rubbing these three ingredients together: you can't be an effective opinion writer without a set of values that informs what you're advocating. Dov Seidman likes to remind me of the Talmudic saying "What comes from the heart enters the heart." What doesn't come from your heart will never enter someone else's heart. It takes caring to ignite

caring; it takes empathy to ignite empathy. You also can't have an effective column without some "take" on the biggest forces shaping the world in which we live and how to influence them. Your view of the Machine can never be perfect or immutable. It always has to be a work in progress that you are building and rebuilding as you get new information and the world changes. But it is very difficult to persuade people to do something if you can't connect the dots for them in a convincing way—why this action will produce this result, because this is how the gears and pulleys of the Machine work. And, finally, I told Bojia, you'll never have an opinion column that works unless it is inspired and informed by real people. It can't just be the advocacy of abstract principles.

When you put your value set together with your analysis of how the Machine works and your understanding of how it is affecting people and culture in different contexts, you have a worldview that you can then apply to all kinds of situations to produce your opinions. Just as a data scientist needs an algorithm to cut through all the unstructured data and all the noise to see the relevant patterns, an opinion writer needs a worldview to create heat and light.

But to keep that worldview fresh and relevant, I suggested to Bojia, you have to be constantly reporting and learning—more so today than ever. Anyone who falls back on tried-and-true formulae or dogmatism in a world changing this fast is asking for trouble. Indeed, as the world becomes more interdependent and complex, it becomes more vital than ever to widen your aperture and to synthesize more perspectives.

My own thinking on this subject has been deeply influenced by Lin Wells, who teaches strategy at the National Defense University. According to Wells, it is fanciful to suppose that you can opine about or explain this world by clinging to the inside or outside of any one rigid explanatory box or any single disciplinary silo. Wells describes three ways of thinking about a problem: "inside the box," "outside the box," and "where there is no box." The only sustainable approach to thinking today about problems, he argues, "is thinking without a box."

Of course, that doesn't mean having no opinion. Rather, it means having no limits on your curiosity or the different disciplines you might draw on to appreciate how the Machine works. Wells calls this approach—which I will employ in this book—being "radically inclusive." It involves bringing into your analysis as many relevant people, pro-

cesses, disciplines, organizations, and technologies as possible—factors that are often kept separate or excluded altogether. For instance, the only way you will understand the changing nature of geopolitics today is if you meld what is happening in computing with what is happening in telecommunications with what is happening in the environment with what is happening in globalization with what is happening in demographics. There is no other way today to develop a fully rounded picture.

These are the main lessons I shared with Bojia in my memos and our coffees. But here is a confession, which I also happily shared with him at our last meeting, which happened as I was completing this book: I had never thought this deeply about my own craft and what makes a column work until our chance encounter prompted me to do so. Had I not paused to engage him, I never would have taken apart, examined, and then reassembled my own framework for making sense of the world in a period of rapid change.

Not surprisingly, the experience set my mind whirring. And not surprisingly, my meetings with Bojia soon led me to start asking myself the same questions I was asking him to explore: What is my value set and where did it come from? How do I think the Machine works today? And what have I learned about how different peoples and cultures are being impacted by the Machine and responding to it?

That's what I started doing—in the pause—and the rest of this book is my answer.

Part II is about how I think the Machine works now—what I think are the biggest forces reshaping more things in more places in more ways on more days. Hint: the Machine is being driven by simultaneous accelerations in technology, globalization, and climate change, all interacting with one another.

And Part III is about how these accelerating forces are affecting people and cultures. That is, how they are reshaping the workplace, geopolitics, politics, ethical choices, and communities—including the small town in Minnesota where I grew up and where my own values were shaped.

Part IV offers the conclusions I draw from it all.

In short, this book is one giant column about the world today. It aims to define the key forces that are driving change around the world, to explain how they are affecting different people and cultures, and to

identify what I believe to be the values and responses most appropriate to managing these forces, in order to get the most out of them for the most people in the most places and to cushion their harshest impacts.

So you never know what can result from pausing to talk to another person. To make a short story long—Bojia got a framework for his blog and I got a framework for this book. Think of it as an optimist's guide to thriving and building resilience in this age of accelerations, surely one of the great transformative moments in history.

As a reporter, I am continually amazed that often, when you go back and re-report a story or a period of history, you discover things you never saw the first time. As I began to write this book, it immediately became clear to me that the technological inflection point that is driving the Machine today occurred in a rather innocuous-sounding year: 2007.

What the hell happened in 2007?