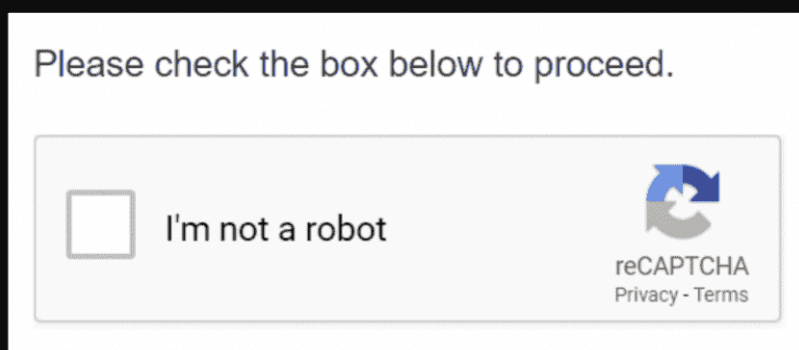


# THE DEATH OF A TEACHER

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We are marked from the day of our birth with an end date; all is indeed vanity. To forget our mortality is thus to lose something human, to become inhuman.

**Category:** [Essay](#)

**Tags:** [AI](#), [books](#), [ChatGPT](#), [Clemens Cavallin](#), [culture](#), [death](#), [teachers](#)

The new AI chatbot ChatGTP released upon the world last year has by now churned out millions of texts ranging from short Norwegian poems on existential angst to rows of code for computer games. It has even humorously advised someone to put up bounce castles at polling stations. Unsurprisingly, there is an ever-growing mass of words about its apocalyptic abilities—although some of those are in fact written by the bot itself. Therefore, to dispel doubts about my humanity, I assure you that I'm not a robot and have not been using any artificial intelligence enhancing circuits. Only human editors have contributed to making this text intelligible and not too meandering—but I confess that my computer has, for good or ill, assisted me with continuous advice on English spelling and grammar. Despite this, I am fully responsible for any infelicitous phrasings; you will have to trust me on that.

## Death and knowledge

A theme that has persistently tugged at my sleeve, as I have moved through the education system to my current station as a middle-aged professor, is that of death. When I was young and determined to make my mark somehow, mortality was not a pressing issue, but it was there all along trying to tell me something important. Understand me right, it is not primarily my own limited time span I am referring to. It is the death of knowledge, of wisdom, and insight. We tend to create small worlds around us through customs, ornaments, procedures, roles, and expectations. They make up the stable environment within which we live, and in many ways this order is necessary for human life. We are both creators and sustainers of miniature kingdoms that affirm who we are. In our domestic cosmos we deposit bits of knowledge, memories of the past, and ideals. Although they acquire in this way a stability faintly echoing the perfection of eternity, they are like us, fused with mutable matter.

The mechanical society challenges this embodied nature of knowledge. Modern

universities have 'functional' classrooms with the latest impersonal technological gadgets; the walls are white and bare, the chairs and tables abstract and stiff. There are no traces of persons having lived there, no deposits of knowledge and insight. The average classroom is eminently practical, which means that anything can take place there. It is a value neutral and impartial container, lacking in history and with no future—timeless and inhuman. Knowledge is accordingly no more than information valued for its usefulness. Attempts are made, of course, to engage the students as subjects critically thinking about the information presented. Lecturing is even frowned upon as monological, but also, I suspect, because it makes it hard to escape the incarnated nature of learning. The idiosyncrasies of the teacher, the little world he or she is trying to build, pollutes the purity of the whitewashed classroom. A perfectly organized educational institution, with its complex arrangements of rational plans, rules, procedures, forms, and quality assurance systems does not allow for the creation of idiosyncratic habitats.

The death of a teacher is then not the collapse of a world into which knowledge, wit, and perhaps some sprinkles of wisdom have been deposited. The research data and results are stored on a server; the name sign is taken down; the cubicle office vacated, and a new information servant is installed.

After studying Sanskrit at the university for a year with a jovial, red cheeked instructor, I and the other students sat through the final exam, sweating over difficult case endings encoded in a strange script. Two weeks later our teacher was dead. It was hard to believe, as he had looked perfectly healthy though somewhat chubby.

The head of the department, a wiry professor approaching retirement age, had been set on handing over the baton stick to his disciple, our now deceased teacher, but now he had to continue on his own. The academic subject of the department was the comparative study of Indo-European languages, and the professor was knowledgeable in Avestan, Sanskrit, Hittite and Celtic languages, and of course Latin and Greek, etc. The department was his miniature kingdom, consisting of three rooms populated by many old and a few new books and some hardy students.

At this unfortunate turn of events, the faculty bureaucracy saw their chance and decided that, with the retirement of the last professor, the department of dead languages would cease to exist. Still the professor did not give up and struggled valiantly for the survival of the department, by almost any means possible. After mandatory retirement, he continued to teach a few students, including me, clandestinely. He arranged a small workspace behind some shelves in a utility room. On his desk was an ancient Mac computer and some essential reference literature—notably the well-thumbed, orange-colored booklets of Mayrhofer's *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*. The other books, many as old as the university itself, founded in the 19th century, were stored in a former bathroom in the arts faculty, as the library did not see any need for them. This was a time when due to 'lack of space' books from departmental libraries were recycled or given away. Sometimes the professor took out a key, and we went to the former bathroom, taking care not to be seen as the book deposit was not sanctioned from above or at least not blessed by the higher authorities. He led the way, slightly stooping with age and as always immaculately dressed in suit and tie. Inside the half-secret sanctuary, we had to use a torchlight to find our way, like archeologists entering the inner chamber of a pharaoh, but we did not really do anything there. He was just checking in on the books, saluting them so to say and making me sense their importance. They were the seeds from which a reborn department was to sprout at some future happy day.

After some time, both the books and the professor were finally forced out. Most of the Sanskrit volumes ended up in my shelves as monuments of what once was. In this way, the university's resources and space were cleared for new studies, such as bibliotherapy and ecocritical views on animals in literature. Still, something had been lost, a place where ancient civilizations were kept alive by the act of reading. Now they were ghosts trapped inside thin sheets of paper. Of course, it all had no obvious, immediate usefulness; but with the eviction of Avestan hymns and Sanskrit poems, something humane became thinner. It made me realize the fragility of knowledge lodged in perishable human beings and coded onto combustible materials.

## Jars of clay

Maybe it is good that we must carry our most treasured insights in jars of clay. To be human means journeying toward death. We are marked from the day of our birth with an end date; all is indeed vanity. To forget our mortality is thus to lose something human, to become inhuman. The personal nature of death provides us with a natural source of humility, but also with an understanding of wisdom and the futility of facts that is difficult to cultivate in classrooms more barren than a dentist office.

The machinelike culture we live in does not accept death but wants to transform our lives into perpetual mechanisms: rational calculations aiming toward quantifiable goals. It is making us all into bots. At too many university staff meetings, I have suffered through PowerPoint slides highlighting the satisfaction score from the latest national student evaluation. Panic ensues when a course has a meagre 3.2, but a sigh of relief is heard when it rises above 3.5 or even a congratulation from the presenter: “Good job, everyone.” A standard of ‘qualitative assurance’ ensures not only that excellence is measured with digital exactness, but also that teachers are forced to be constantly filling out forms. Why do we do this? It is because the bots do not understand real *qualitative* insights—they reject it like children do broccoli. We have for a long time adapted our ways to what bots understand and can process, and one day when they have matured enough, they take over our roles. Bots teaching bots.

However, bots do not die. Scarily, they are not even material entities. They are made up of code, of logical relations instantiated on a digital memory unit. The inscription of the code into a material is not part of the nature of the code; it is not embodied. It can be rematerialized in any suitable medium in as many copies as wanted without becoming something different. In this way, bots do not age and do not die. According to our animal instincts, a humanoid robot is more terrifying than a set of digital data and logical rules which can keep up thousands of conversations simultaneously in all parts of the world. It does not age; it does not sleep.

Of course, code is still mostly written by humans, and if all of its instantiations are destroyed it ceases to exist in a manifest form. The same could be said about books written by Greek philosophers, which live or die by having been laboriously transferred from manuscript to manuscript. Nowadays most of the texts surviving as the result of a long chain of readings and rewritings since antiquity have been immortalized by digitalization. They have been frozen in time, deprived of death. The ancient practice of manual copying used to introduce variations and idiosyncrasies that made each book unique, something that the printing press already changed. But a material book still retains something of an individual character. In some of my books are signatures on the first page of my uncle who was a priest and my grandfather who was a scholar of Latin. The volumes are in this way a heritage, personal notes from their libraries and encouragement not to give up. They now mingle with the Ramayana and Buddhist scriptures on my shelves as rivulets flowing together into a temporary artificial dam. Electronic texts are abstracted from the perishable, material world and are therefore further away from human life.

## Renewed life

When writing this reflection, I found that there is something called 'Death Education' focused on learning how to cope with dying and grief. What I am calling for is, however, another form of death education, namely the recovery of a sense of our humanity and our created worlds as mortal. We will all be soon leaving this earth. It is therefore of no use pretending that we can build a perfect system here below. We must dedicate time and resources to the traces and deposits of persons, not as digitized information, but as living memories, glimmers of immortality enshrined in material objects, in architectural space, in gardens and works of art. We carry eternal ideas in fragile vessels. The bots on the other hand do not die as they are not embodied. Instead they have an eerily sempiternal, angelic, or demonic character.

Maybe at a future time, the dusty old books on my shelves will come to life again and a department of dead cultures will spring from them. Or they will have a worthy funeral, as in India where copies of the Sikh holy scriptures are ritually cremated. At one such shrine

in [Dehradun](#), the books are first sprinkled with purifying water and then burned in a room where only five chosen men are present. Afterwards, the ashes are carried ceremoniously in public procession to the nearby river and immersed. Interestingly, they even incinerate “old texts of other religions as well as faded pictures of gods and goddesses, marriage invitations and magazines with a religious theme.”

A world run by bots is devoid of sacredness and therefore of elaborate funerals of humans, books, magazines, and invitations. They are replaced by recycling and waste management procedures. I think the Sikh custom has something to teach us. A parallel is the Catholic ritual ‘[burying](#)’ of the Alleluia during the season of Lent, during which it is not sung. At Easter, the joyous exclamation of Alleluia is resurrected. With death comes also the hope of renewed life, as spring follows upon winter.