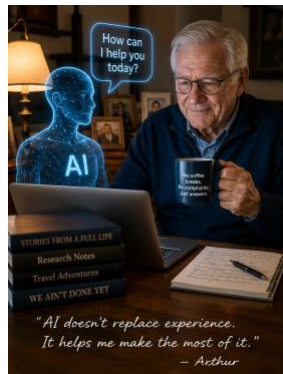


Artificial Intelligence (AI): Colleague and Friend... or, is it?

By Arthur Shapiro



I have a colleague who never sleeps, never gets impatient, and has read more than anyone I know. I've come to think of this colleague as something between a research assistant, a writing partner, and a friend. That's how I view AI.

I know how that sentence sounds to some people. We are living through a period of real anxiety about artificial intelligence, including anxiety about jobs, concern about students misusing it, concern about misinformation, and concern about what happens to human connection when machines get good at sounding human. I don't think that anxiety is foolish. Some of it is well-earned, and I'll get to that. But I've spent the last couple of years using these tools for real work that matters to me, and I want to tell you what that's been like, because it doesn't match the story I keep hearing.

What I've actually used it for

I'm not talking about novelty. I'm talking about three examples where AI has quietly become my assistant. Not my surrogate; my staff.

Research and decisions that matter. When I needed to understand my cardiac care options — comparing hospitals, weighing specific physicians, and making sense of diagnostic tests I'd never heard of, I didn't want a search engine dumping links on me. I wanted something that could explain, in plain language, what a test measures and why one doctor's approach might differ from another's. I still talked to my own doctors, and that conversation stayed mine. But I walked into those appointments as a more informed patient, asking better questions, because a tireless, patient explainer had helped me get there first.

Creative work. I'm writing a new book of stories about retirement, about the unscheduled life that comes after the working years end. AI has been in the room for much of that: helping me think through a query letter, wrestling with titles, and finding the right literary company or agent. It's the kind of thing an editor or a sharp-eyed friend might do, except it's available at eleven at night, when the thought is fresh. It hasn't written my book. It couldn't. I won't let it. The stories, the voice, the memory, those are mine. But it has been a genuinely useful thinking partner, like a

good writers' group: someone to push back, to ask "have you considered," and to help me see my own material more clearly.

Professional work under deadline. I served as an expert witness, producing reports and rebuttals that had to be precise, well-argued, and airtight enough to withstand cross-examination. That kind of writing used to take me weeks, with time spent reviewing the data, building the argument, and drafting and redrafting, tightening every claim so it could hold up under scrutiny. With AI helping me organize the material, challenge my reasoning, and move through drafts faster, the same work now takes days. The analysis is still mine. The judgment calls, the opinions I'm willing to put my name to under oath, those don't change. But as all AI sites state, AI can make mistakes, so I often asked the same question across multiple platforms.

There's more. Planning trips down to the printable itinerary, helping our synagogue's emergency preparedness committee think through security protocols, and sorting out which hearing aid actually fits my life rather than a marketing brochure. None of it is dramatic. All of it is real.

A comparison

People my age remember when the internet arrived, bringing the same mixture of promise and dread now attached to AI. It was going to destroy attention spans, weaken traditional journalism, and replace the corner bookstore. Some of that happened. But it also connected the world's knowledge to anyone who wanted it, put a research library in every pocket, and let someone publish a memoir without a gatekeeper's permission.

I think AI is at that stage of development, not a gadget but a shift in what a person can do alone at their desk. The historian without a research assistant now has one. The writer without an editor on retainer now has a thoughtful first reader. The patient without a doctor in the family now has someone to translate the jargon before the appointment. That's not a small thing. That's exactly the kind of help that used to belong to people with money, connections, or institutional access, now available to all.

What the skeptics and naysayers get right

The economic disruption is real. Jobs will change, and some will disappear. "Learn to adapt" is cold comfort to someone whose livelihood is on the line right now. Massive data centers pose environmental and community problems. The risk of misinformation is real; the tools can be wrong, and many people won't check. The worry about reliance on AI rather than people is real too and worth taking seriously: if I ever found myself reaching for AI instead of a person I know and trust, instead of my friends, instead of the people I work with on committee business, that would be a problem, not a feature.

I'd also say that the companies building this technology owe the public real transparency, rigorous safety work, and humility about what they don't yet know. Enthusiasm for the tool isn't the same as blind trust in the industry.

Where I land

I don't think AI is a miracle or a monster. I think it's a genuinely new kind of instrument, analogous to the printing press or the internet. As with all new developments and technologies, what it becomes depends heavily on how we choose to use it.

For me, so far, it has meant walking into a cardiologist's office better prepared. It has meant a manuscript that's further along than it would be on its own. That's no small thing. That's a colleague worth having.

It's not about fear or fascination. It's how I've felt about most of the big changes I've lived through.