



FIRST PERSON

Instead of tapping my grown children for tech help, I now turn to a kindly chatbot

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Ferrari of Palm Beach



ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX SIKLOS

In my household, a computer with no internet qualifies as a crisis. I am a boomer with chronic technophobia. I avoid self-checkout kiosks, online banking and any device that speaks before I do. When I try foolishly to engage a chatbot, I often get a reply such as “I’m sorry, your question is not clear.” This is usually after I have asked it something revolutionary like, “How do I reach a live person?”

For years, my technical support department consisted of my adult children. They were efficient, capable and increasingly unavailable. I suspect that when my name appeared on their phones, they braced themselves. They likely muttered, “It’s father Luddite,” and probably let the call go to voicemail.

What type of grandparent will I become?

Eventually I redirected my distress calls to my grandchildren. They were patient. Also fearless. They introduced me to artificial intelligence.

I thanked them warmly; confident I would never use it.

But after three computer restarts, I needed help. I exercised heroic restraint and did not call my children. I briefly imagined them sending me a message straight out of *The Godfather* – maybe a dial phone wrapped in newspaper.

I tried my usual fixes, restarting the machine, briefly removing the battery and uttering a few choice curses. When that failed, I called my granddaughter. “Try AI,” she said. “Ask it.”

So I did. From my iPhone, which still had internet, I typed out my predicament: internet working on phone and iPad, not on Mac. Within seconds, the AI replied that it knew exactly what the problem was. Something to do with DNS settings and other mysterious initials.

Of course, I thought. DNS. Naturally. I suspected that all the time.

For the next hour, it guided me through what felt like an elaborate dance. Click here. Quit that. Open System Settings. Select Network. Advanced. Change numbers. Restart. I felt like I was doing the hokey pokey.

At one point I couldn’t find the menu bar. The AI calmly assured me that Apple sometimes hides it and told me where to look. When I asked what a “cache” was, it replied, “Excellent question.” No one has described my tech questions as excellent before. Possibly not since 1999, before Y2K.

In a tough job market, what AI skills do you really need?

When frustration crept in, I asked whether perhaps I should simply buy a new computer. The AI responded, “I understand your frustration. Take a few deep breaths. We’re almost there.”

It did not call me Luddite.

It did not sigh. It did not say, “Dad, we’ve gone over this.”

We fixed the problem.

The real surprise was not that the internet returned. It was that the machine never once made me feel foolish.

In recent years, I have become aware of how easily one can feel left behind. Technology evolves, interfaces change, passwords multiply like rabbits. The world updates itself overnight. You wake up and discover that what was intuitive yesterday now requires a tutorial.

It is not only confusing. It can quietly erode your confidence.

AI helps me parent by easing my mental load while saving me money in the long run

Artificial intelligence, for all its ominous undertones and cinematic warnings, offered something unexpected: patience without condescension.

Yes, I am aware of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I remember HAL. I have no illusions about the risks of powerful machines. My new digital companion may one day develop ambitions. For now, it seems content adjusting my DNS. If it begins humming “Daisy, Daisy...” I will unplug everything.

There is also something disarmingly optimistic and upbeat about it. I suspect that if I told AI my childhood dream was to become an NHL goalie, it would not mention age, reflexes or cartilage. It would probably suggest drills and ask, “Which team do you have in mind.”

That, too, has value.

I still approach AI with a touch of trepidation. I am not about to let it run my life. But in my golden years, I did not expect to find gold in a chatbot. Nor did I expect my grandchildren to become my technology mentors.

There is a certain poetry in that reversal. The generation I once guided now guides me. And somewhere between their world and mine sits a patient digital genie, ready to explain what a sidebar is – without rolling its eyes.

If you need me, I’ll be out for a power walk. A future NHL team may require my services.

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