

When Labor Gets Weird

By Austen Tucker · 2026

In 1980, David Byrne and Toni Basil went to UCLA and USC and watched archive footage of people in religious ecstasy. African tribal rituals. Japanese sects. Trance states. Southern televangelists speaking in tongues. They watched hours of it. Then Byrne went into a white room in a suit and bowtie and invented a way of moving that had never existed before.

YouTube video

He did not copy them. He absorbed them. What came out was unmistakably him — twitchy, rigid, caught between dance and seizure — but it contained the whole archive. Basil said, "David kind of choreographed himself."

Same as it ever was.

I think about that video when I think about what is happening to us.

Not because it is hidden. Because it is boring.

It arrives as a better autocomplete. A better search box. A chatbot that writes a decent email. A coding tool that saves you twenty minutes. An agent that can take a task off your plate. It arrives in little clerical bites. Dry. Procedural. Easy to dismiss.

But then, like gravity — it's already here.

I am not writing this from a safe distance. I am not sitting in some observer's box, pointing at the field and calling plays. I am in it. I am writing this as someone whose life depends on knowledge work continuing to exist in a form I can still do.

I am disabled. Physical labor is not waiting for me as some noble backup plan. My life has been built around thinking, writing, synthesizing, organizing, communicating, and making sense of complex things for other people.

Maybe I am wrong. I hope, in some narrow selfish way, that I am a little wrong. But I do not think I am. If my numbers are right, I am looking at losing my job too. Not someday in a dramatic robot apocalypse. In the ordinary way people lose jobs now: through efficiency, restructuring, shifting expectations, quiet

math. Through the slow realization that the market value of what you do is changing faster than your body, your résumé, or your nervous system can keep up.

Musicians like to talk about what makes an instrument "deep."

You can tell how deep an instrument is by how differently people sound on it. A harmonica is lovely, but most people given one will circle the same few shapes. A piano is different. Give people time with a piano and they begin to diverge. Touch, rhythm, taste, phrasing, instinct. The instrument has enough depth to reveal the player.

That is what AI feels like to me now. Not a vending machine for generic content. A deep instrument. One that can sound cheap in clumsy hands and astonishing in practiced ones. One that reveals taste instead of replacing it.

For a long time, the story I told myself about work was simple. Get better. Learn more. Become more useful. Refine your taste. Refine your craft. Build skills nobody can take away.

I still believe in craft. I still believe in skill. But I do not think that story is enough anymore.

The question is no longer just, "How do I get better?"

The question is, "How do I get better at using systems that amplify me?"

And after that comes the question that scares me more: "What do I do when those same systems start replacing parts of me?"

At Acme Corporation (it's always Acme here on my own site), my boss gave me an AI agent connected to our knowledge bases, a week without responsibilities, and a task: "Automate away your job."

It took three days and a lot of caffeine, but I click-and-dragged my way to bespoke AI agents that did 80% of my work. Most of that time was learning the platform; if I'd had my own AI tooling to work with, I could have done it faster. But it worked.

All of this, done in my pajamas.

And it wasn't like the robot replaced me completely. I still monitor its outputs; adjust its prompt; and, when the time calls for it, step in to do the manual work myself.

But it was enough. My job is going away. The years of craft do not get a vote.

Not because someone wanted to save a buck. Because the machinery that made craft valuable is becoming antiquated.

Same as it ever was.

Lately I keep sorting AI use into four modes, mostly so I can think clearly.

AI as a replacement for Google. Ask. Retrieve. Summarize. Mostly incremental.

AI as a chat partner. Brainstorming, feedback, loose collaboration. This is where people start calling it magical.

AI as a tool. The model is no longer a conversation you visit. It becomes a component in the work itself — touching files, context, the actual thing you are building.

AI as orchestration. Here you are not fetching outputs. You are the director: deciding what the system touches, what order things happen in, what gets reviewed, what gets shipped, what stays human. You are not doing the work. You are deciding how the work gets done — and that decision is now the work.

I think a lot of us are going to end up functioning like the executive team of our own tiny company. Not because we dreamed of becoming entrepreneurs. But because our "company" is now our output, and our job is to manage how that output gets made.

What do I keep. What do I delegate. What do I veto? What actually sounds like me?

What is mine, and what belongs to the machine?

That was the question where the floor dropped out for me. Once you see that, you cannot unsee it. This is not just a better interface. It is a new way of working. Maybe even a new way of being valuable.

AI isn't real yet. Not real in the mythic sense. Not the spaceship computer people imagined. Not coherent, reliable, or fully inhabited by culture yet.

And still: it is socially transformative anyway. It still hallucinates. It still struggles with counting Rs in "strawberry."

It's still slop. But children will make it real.

Not because adults adapt. But because children, free from the burden of experience, will find ways to breathe life into the tech.

Same as it ever was.

People want this conversation to stay abstract. They want it to live up in the cloud layer, where we can debate "the future of work" like it is a panel discussion. But this is not abstract. This is rent. This is medication. This is dignity. This is the question of whether the kind of person I am still has a place in the economy that is arriving.

What happens when labor gets cheap?

What happens when more and more forms of cognitive work become abundant, automatable, and easy to accelerate? What happens to the people who built lives around being good at exactly those things? What happens to those of us whose bodies already narrowed the field of possible work long before AI arrived? What happens when the culture still expects us to earn our keep, but the definition of valuable work is changing faster than we can metabolize?

I do not have a neat answer to these.

I wish I did. I wish this essay ended with a clean little rallying cry and a branded takeaway and some polished note about adaptation. But what I have, if I am honest, is fear. Not only fear. But fear, yes. Grief too. And a strange kind of awe.

Because I can feel two truths at once.

One is that these tools are extraordinary. I have felt my own powers stretch because of them. I have seen what happens when a person with taste and drive and a point of view gets access to systems that can amplify thought. It is real. Something new is possible here.

The other truth is that possibility does not guarantee mercy.

A tool can be miraculous and still arrive inside a system that chews people up. A breakthrough can still leave casualties. Increased abundance can still make individual lives more precarious before anything like justice catches up.

Maybe that is the truest thing I can say right now: I do not know where this lands, and I am afraid of the answer. There is no simpler version of me waiting in the wings, no easier fallback, no clean retreat into some safer economy. But I am still here. I am still learning. I am still trying to understand the new instrument before the room changes around me completely.

Maybe that is what survival looks like at first: choosing to keep your eyes open while the children, growing up inside these systems, make them real.

Same as it ever was.