

The Stepladder

By Austen Tucker · 2026

Most people, I am told, have what's called continuity of memory.

They experience time as a line.

What did I do yesterday?

What did I do today?

What am I doing tomorrow?

What did I do last month?

There is a thread. A connective tissue. The scenes happen one after another, and the person who wakes up today is more or less the person who went to sleep yesterday. They have the receipts.

I experience time more like a stepladder.

I lose minutes, hours, days, even months at a time. My memory is imperfect because it's shattered across different regions of my brain, thanks to dissociative identity disorder.

Different parts, different pieces. And while one part is out experiencing the world, the rest cease to exist. Time slips by without end or any sense of permanence. When we return, it is with wide, surprised eyes as if waking from a hypnotic trance, with no clue what happened since we were last in front.

We call it going on vacation inside. It can last hours, days, even months.

And one thing we can all agree on is that coming to has never been more exciting for a technologist.

Newton invented calculus. Or developed it, depending on how hard you want to argue with history. He measured change over time. If you measure that, then you can derive what the rate of change is, as it grows and it shrinks.

Find that line. You draw the curve. Bam. That's a derivative. (Oh, and by the way, he had to do it to prove something else, because this man was that brilliant.)

Change, graphed over time, can be linear or exponential. One seems like business as usual.

The other leaves a pit in your gut.

I'm never one to turn down a chance to turn a disability into a superpower, but I offer my experience as an informal, hearsay proof that the singularity is real:

Alters used to come to from vacations and ask, "What changed in AI?" and get a shrug.

Now, we experience a step change to our entire workflow after going on vacation for as little as a week.

Then, "What changed?" brought maybe a new model.

A phone had a better camera. A social network had become worse in a new, exciting way. Somebody had released a thing with a name we hadn't learned yet.

Nowadays, "What changed?" is an entire upgrade, every three months, to everything, all at once.

The software is different. The models are different. The things models can do are different. The ways people work are different. The baseline moved while you were gone. The floor is gone. You are standing on a different floor.

When your memory spikes every three months, you end up studying something every three months.

I don't experience the slow crawl.

I experience a three-month chunk of technological change at a time.

You remember the jump cut. You don't remember the scene right after it. You remember the opening image.

That is not always pleasant.

But it is useful.

Because I think the growth of technology has, for the first time, outstripped my perception of time.

In other words, the line has gone from linear to exponential.

For a long time, technology was fast enough that most people could still pretend it was a line. You learned a tool. You got good at it. You used it for a few years. The next version came out, and it had some buttons in different places. Nobody died. Skills within app ecosystems became career specializations, like a blacksmith specializing in tools versus the blacksmith that shoes your horse.

Things were good for those who could synthesize and memorize a lot of information. A lot of people got paid to file reports on time, to put paper a in bin b.

Computers automated things, but they were crude cogs. You still had to have a human pulling the switch. And when pulling that switch is complicated - because all software is a complicated, bug-riddled mess underneath the veneer, take my word for it - people got paid a lot of money to maintain this code.

Things were good if you knew the right people and could tolerate staring at a screen all day.

Then, a jump cut:

A year ago, if you asked me what models were coming out, I'd rattle off a handful of open-source Chinese models and minor upgrades on ChatGPT and Claude.

Now I come back from vacation inside and the computer can hear me. And I can orchestrate as many agents as I want and watch them as they work my computer.

Being able to talk to you and say, "Take an app shot."

And then you do it.

And then you can act on that.

That is not a small change. That is not a nicer interface. That is a new relationship with the machine.

I have spent a lot of my life translating myself into the shapes that computers accept. Keyboard shortcuts. Screen readers. Menus that were designed by people who assumed eyes. Workarounds stacked on workarounds, each one a little bridge across somebody else's assumption about what a person is.

Now I can say what I need.

And the computer can do something.

That matters.

It also scares me a little.

Not because I think the machine is evil. I am tired of that conversation. A tool can be dangerous. A system can be exploitative. A company can be full of assholes. None of this requires us to pretend the tool itself is a demon.

It scares me because I know what a discontinuity feels like.

I know what it feels like to wake up and find the world has moved without you.

I know what it feels like to have to reconstruct the missing time from artifacts, messages, calendars, browser tabs, and the expressions on other people's faces.

Most people are about to learn that feeling.

DID is not a metaphor for technology, and technology is not a metaphor for DID. I have an unusual instrument.

My dissociative disorder gives me a brutal and oddly precise way to measure discontinuity. Every few months, I wake up to a new snapshot. I get the before image and the after image with much of the middle missing.

That makes the curve visible.

When the difference between snapshots was small, the world still felt linear.

Now the difference is not small.

Now the derivative is screaming.

We are in the singularity because the jump cuts are becoming the lived experience. Because the period between “I understand this” and “I do not recognize this anymore” keeps getting shorter. Because the future is no longer arriving politely, one software update at a time.

It is arriving while some of us are on vacation inside.

And I am here, on the stepladder, taking notes.