

Habits for Humanity in the Age of AI

Help your kids build the character to make the most of technology rather than becomes a slave of it.

[Ben Sasse](#) May 8, 2026 at 2:15 pm



We are in a civilization-warping crisis of institutional decline. The consequences are all around us.

- *We're lonely.* The share of Americans who tell pollsters that they have

no close friends has quadrupled since 1990. A study last month from the University of Arizona found that over the last 15 years, people average 338 fewer spoken words per day than the year before. That's 120,000 fewer words a year.

- *We don't trust our institutions.* Pew data shows this most pointedly around the federal government, whose trust has dropped from 77% in the mid-1960s to 17% last year. Pew and Gallup have measured 10 different institutions every year for about 50 years. Nine of them have experienced a declining level of public trust for four consecutive decades. The military is the only exception.

- *We don't trust one another.* Only 1 in 3 Americans tell Pew that they think they can trust most people, down significantly from previous decades. Conspiracy theories are metastasizing across the internet, and more of our neighbors are falling prey to these echo chambers.

How did we get here? We should understand that the economic and especially the technological moment we're in is far more fundamental than anything in politics. Our story is the story of bits vs. atoms. For almost all of human history, until a couple of years ago, productivity was measured in atoms. Job categories lasted for a lifetime; physical products were the tangible output. Today, it's mostly about bits—data. Sociologists call it the postindustrial economy, which is a way of saying we don't even know what it is; it's the after-the-last-thing thing.

The debate right now is usually whether AI is going to bring heaven or hell. And the troubling, dizzying, but true answer is it's going to bring both. When the cost of quantification falls close to zero, amazing new opportunities are unlocked. But lifelong work is a thing of the past, and our fellow citizens don't know how to articulate it. They know how to

feel it, and it feels scary. It has massive implications for how we conceive of ourselves.

Think about how our identity is wrapped up in our work. For thousands of years, people lived in set communities from birth until death, and their lives were defined by their work. Many times our work even gave us our names: Smith, Miller, Carter, Mason, Weaver, Brewer, Baker, Cook, Porter.

Most jobs are going to be unbundled and rebundled. Emotional intelligence and character are going to matter more than they've mattered in the past, because the hardest things to automate are the things that depend on relationships.

But if the future of work is relational, the nature of relationships matters. A really good coach—that's a relational job. You can motivate young men. You can help people get fit. That's an important relationship, and the work matters. But an OnlyFans model selling pictures of her feet to lonely men? That's also a relationship, but it's pretty damn bleak. Our daughters and our sons deserve better.

All of this that we're living through and that our neighbors feel is so much bigger than whatever clickbait outrage is driving the cable news cycle today and will be forgotten by Thursday. A technological revolution is driving an economic revolution in our time, and the changes in this economy are already having and will have more profound spiritual, cultural, educational and even political implications—though the political is arguably the least important.

To be clear, this is an incredibly exciting moment to live. This isn't a neo-Luddite argument. Who could have thought we could launch

rockets to space and then catch them as they plummet back to earth? We should all stand in awe of this. It is a breathtaking tribute to human imagination, ingenuity, innovation and entrepreneurial creation. As someone who's being kept alive this very month by incredible advances in biotechnology, I am a zealous proponent for disruptive innovation.

The challenge is how to live with virtue and technology when technology tends to erode virtue and place and human texture. Our response must be to cultivate habits, community and a revivification of place.

The biggest divide isn't going to be race, class or income. It will be between people who master the tools of technology and those who outsource their affections and their habits to these tools and algorithms. The future will be awe-inspiring for the first group, and life will be miserable for the second—heaven and hell.

Lots of us grew up fearing the dystopian future of George Orwell, but it turns out the dystopian future of Aldous Huxley was much more likely. We face the tyranny of ubiquitous pleasure, of easy comfort—the soft despotism of “Brave New World,” not the brutal authoritarianism of “1984.”

The family is the source of the habits that we're going to need to cultivate the next generation. Nobody loves your kids as much as you do. Loves are local, and creating the habits that foster the love of the good, the true and the beautiful begins at home. The bad news of what I'm suggesting is that it's deeply inconvenient. The good news is that parenting has always been inconvenient. It's the ultimate inconvenience.

So let's flag four starter habits:

- *Reading.* Fewer than half of Americans read a book last year. That is a national crisis. Shorter attention spans are killing our imagination. Before our kids even learn the alphabet, we hand them tablets, and we know from neurological imagery that it is rotting their brains. Families need to read aloud together again to build children's affection for books and to build a shared library—a family canon to inform the character of a home.

As in every debate about the canon, there will be fights about what is in and what is out. There is no definitive answer to the canon because the intellectual journey is central to the point. We need to teach our kids to fall in love with reading and show them that the endless dialogue between ideas is more rewarding than the endless scrolling of social media.

- *Hard work.* This habit can start at an early age. Sure, it's easier to load and unload the dishwasher and put away the laundry yourself, but we miss the opportunity if we don't bring the next generation into the labor. Over time, small jobs become medium jobs and ultimately pave the way for hard tasks.

Young men especially need work. There's a reason that dad hobbies are all chores: woodworking, yard work, grilling, tinkering. It's work that engages your body when so much of our work has merely engaged our minds. Right now we are insulating our children from work, on average until they're in their mid-20s, and by then lots of them turn out not to be able to learn how to do it.

- *Tech sabbaths.* We should love work but not worship it. We need to

be able to set it aside, recognizing that we need rest. In my theological tradition, we remember the Fourth Commandment not only as an obligation but as a gift. As more of our work becomes detached from specific places—Zoom meetings, calls, emails—the habit of rest, of airplane mode, emphasizes place, guards against digital intrusion, and allows the revivification of the thickest, the most local, and the most important. Lock up our devices and keep them away from the family meal. Pay attention to the people around the table, the bread, the conversation, and the hugs and hands.

- *Serious travel.* In the same way that learning another language helps us understand our native tongue more deeply, travel forms character through lived experience. Don't view this as vacation. "Travel" has the same etymological root as "travail." To travel should be a kind of work. It takes work to leave your comfort zone. If you live in a city, you need to experience the country. If you live in the country, you need to know how to navigate the city.

Have your kids take extended leaves of absence from school and go live with other families somewhere else. If you can, figure out how to do multigenerational living with family compounds or other places you can return to. Give kids the thickness of a community of cousins, aunts, uncles and other relatives.

We live in the richest time and place in human history. Yet today's young people are the first generation since we've had polling that has thought the future is going to be worse than the past. They also believe they've lived through more economic hardship than any of the previous three generations. This is nonsense, yet they believe it. The fault is ours.

Character, whether of an individual or of a nation, is molded by habits and by time. This republic requires men and women to do long-form deliberation, serious thinking, honest humility and daily striving. What good is it to gain the whole world if we forfeit the souls that we're supposed to form? We can't expect to remain free without being virtuous, we can't be bold without being rooted, we can't be great without aiming first to be good. To stave off Huxley's dystopia, we must deliberately shape our children's souls so that they can be creators, doers and thinkers embracing the next frontier.

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Former Senator Ben Sasse speaks about his pancreatic cancer diagnosis and his experience with experimental cancer drugs, the challenges of reforming higher education, the dysfunction in the Senate, and what is needed for a strong American comeback. Photo: Shira Kaplan