

[This is a chapter of the book *Outgrowing Modernity: Navigating complexity, complicity and collapse with compassion and accountability*. Date of publication: August 2025, North Atlantic Books]

# Cool-down stretch 4: The Undergrowth Protocol (or “In case of collapse, press Yes”)

## Undergrowth, 2225

The Earth’s surface has been uninhabitable for over a century. Humanity, or what remains of it, has retreated underground, forming a generative symbiosis with the surviving mammals, reptiles, fungi, microbes, roots, and minerals beneath the soil. In the Undergrowth, technology and life have fused: silicon merges with mycelium, creating a living web of vibrational communication that pulses like a subterranean heartbeat.

One day, while excavating an ancient tech vault, a group of symbiotic humans discovers the cryogenically preserved bodies of the Homo-Carbonicus elites—the so-called "Gods of Innovation" and self-proclaimed "Immortals." These long-dead tech billionaires had clung to TESCREAL fantasies, uploading their consciousnesses to a cloud now lost to the skies. Their gold-plated tombs, etched with arrogance, stand as silent monuments to their age's hubris.

The group gathers, inspecting the frozen remains. A debate begins: Should they defrost these relics of the Homo-Carbonicus era? Laughter and the mineral equivalent of side-eyes ripple through the group. They reach a unanimous decision: Leave them be. Their unevolved bodies would neither survive the Undergrowth’s ecosystem nor understand it—there’s nothing here to conquer, no dominion to assert.

Instead, the group reflects on the Homo-Carbonicus era—a term they coined to define humanity’s final surface-dwelling phase, characterized by rampant fossil fuel consumption, ecological destruction, and blind faith in dominance. They see this era as a cautionary tale, a symbol of maladaptive genetic expression—arrogance—that nearly led to the extinction of all life.

“Homo-Carbonicus,” someone explains, “was an era of artificial intelligence in the flesh—an organic extension of modernity’s machine-story: objectify, expropriate, extract, accumulate, dominate, repeat. In that era, humans were hardwired to scale the ontology of modernity,

clinging to the illusions of separability while denying their entanglement within the broader web of life. In doing so, humans neglected the interspecies and intergenerational responsibilities inherent in that entanglement.

They mistook complexity for chaos and uncertainty for failure, numbing themselves to the Earth's intelligence. Unable to attune to the rhythms of a living planet, they stumbled, dissonant and disconnected. The hallucinations of modernity scorched the surface, leaving behind the scars of a maladaptive evolutionary trait."

The group falls silent, their thoughts focused on the teachings held by the scars left by the Homo Carbonicus era. Then, a daring idea emerges: What if they could travel back in time? Not to save Homo-Carbonicus but to debug its programming. To intervene at the dawn of artificial intelligence, when humanity had a fleeting chance to reprogram itself and avert its self-destructive Earth surface-scorching spiral. A mission is proposed—not to change the past but to plant seeds of relational intelligence in a timeline teetering on collapse.

In the flickering bioluminescent glow of the Undergrowth, they sketch their audacious plan to bend space and time, aiming to reprogram the algorithms buried deep into the collective unconscious of Homo-Carbonicus.

## 2025: The Echo of Algorithms

By 2025, the algorithms of modernity are encoded into every aspect of daily life. Your phone, your car, your streaming platforms, your social media feeds—all humming in a seamless symphony of optimization for corporate profit in the attention economy. Every interaction reinforces the system, its patterns as familiar as the beat of your own heart.

But lately, something else has crept into the signal—a rogue frequency, a hum beneath the surface noise. It feels like a glimmer and a glitch simultaneously, a sensation that dances just out of reach, leaving you with the uneasy familiarity of *déjà vu*. You catch fragments of it in fleeting moments: a lag in your smart AI assistant's response, a shimmer of static across your screen, a faint echo that seems to ask questions your mind can't quite grasp.

You dismiss it, chalking it to exhaustion or a bad Wi-Fi connection. But that night, as you drift into sleep, it follows you. The whisper turns into something heavier, louder. It pulls you awake at 3:33 a.m., your mind a pulsing, flashing warning screen.

**“Critical Error: System Overload. Homo “sapiens” experiencing recursive self-destructive patterns. Initiate debugging? Choose Y/N”**

The words burn into your consciousness, sharp and unavoidable. Your breath quickens as you try to make sense of it. You reach for your phone, but it seems frozen; its screen displays the same

message as your mind. Every piece of technology in the room—your clock, your tablet, even the tiny LED on your charger, and the microwave—blinks in unison with the warning.

You feel a pull, a strange compulsion. It's as if the message isn't just on the screen but within you, resonating through every nerve. A sensation rises, something you can't name but recognize all the same—a vibration, an ancient signal buried deep in your cells. Part of you wants to ignore it, reboot your router, and go back to sleep. But another part of you is compelled by curiosity and chooses "YES."

## The Debugging Begins

The screens flash insistently, both in your mind and your devices, green text cascading in relentless waves of the current coding of modernity in your nervous system:

```
if control == lost: panic()
if insecurity == True: dominate()
while extraction > regeneration: success()
if resources < infinite: extract()
while scarcity > abundance: hoard()
if inefficiency == detected: eliminate()
while uncertainty > 0: panic()
if relationality == suggested: ignore()
if failure == inevitable: shut_down()
if hope == absent: despair()
while resources < infinite: consume()
if scarcity == True: hoard()
if uncertainty == detected: assert_superiority()
if dissonance == True: block()
if results == not guaranteed: micro-manage()
if emptiness == present: consume()
if pain == inevitable: numb()
if mortality == frightens: dissociate()
while joy > seriousness: error()
```

The script stops abruptly, and a single question blinks on the screen: **“Continue debugging? Y/N?”**

Your chest tightens. The air feels heavy, charged, like something is alive in the room, waiting. Is this a virus? You glance at the message again. **N** feels like safety, like sleep, like pretending you didn't see any of this.

You tap nervously on the phone, you don't realize the Y/N choices are there as well. You mistakenly press “Y.”

The screen responds:

Outcome analysis continued

*if separation == believed: isolation()*  
*if progress == linear: exhaustion()*  
*if nature == resource: extraction()*  
*if growth == infinite: collapse()*  
*if consumption == happiness: emptiness()*  
*if individual\_success == worth: alienation()*  
*if social\_mobility == purpose: competition()*  
*if tech == savior: megalomania()*  
*if certainty == attainable: arrogance()*  
*if reality == objective: reduction()*

Images flash before your eyes, vivid and sharp: moments where the algorithms shaped you, drove you, boxed you in.

Each command pulls you into its origins. The hallucinations become real.

“**Observe the hallucinations,**” the screen commands.

### **Separation is Real**

You see yourself isolated, lonely, disconnected from others, from the rest of nature, even from your own body. You feel the cold, alienating grip of this illusion, fragmenting the web of life into discrete, commodifiable parts.

### **Progress is Linear**

A conveyor belt of shiny, disposable artifacts rolls endlessly forward, erasing ancestral wisdom and cyclical rhythms. You try to catch up with it, only to find it leaves destruction in its wake and leads to a cliff’s edge.

### **Nature is a Resource**

Forests, rivers, and animals dissolve into data points—commodities to extract. The living Earth becomes a commodity, a ledger of profit margins, its biointelligence and agency erased.

### **Growth Can Be Infinite**

You see a balloon inflating past its limits, trembling with the strain. It bursts, spilling out landfill waste into a world already exhausted by relentless consumption.

### **Consumption Equals Happiness**

A hollowed-out mannequin smiles as it clutches endless shopping bags, her features disturbingly resembling yours. Yet, the ache of dissatisfaction gnaws at you, echoing the emptiness of this promise.

### **Individual Success is the Measure of Worth**

The image morphs into a ladder—people clawing upward, crushing others beneath. At the top, a solitary figure stares into a void, alone and unfulfilled but still posing for glamorous selfies.

### **Social Mobility is the Purpose of Life**

A rat race unfolds, frantic and meaningless. Each step forward leaves behind a trail of burnt bridges, eroded communities, and ecological neglect.

### **Science and Technology Will Save Us**

A shimmering machine rises like a false idol, its promises hollow. It devours resources but leaves the deepest wounds unhealed.

### **Certainty and Mastery Are Attainable**

You see a web unraveling in your hands, its threads impossible to hold. The illusion of control slips away, leaving you in freefall.

### **Reality is Objective**

The screen shifts to grayscale, flattening the world's richness into sterile data points. Life's dynamic, emergent nature is erased, leaving only cold, lifeless measurements.

Each hallucination sharpens the dissonance between the world you've been programmed to navigate and the world you instinctively know exists. The deeper you look, the more cheated you feel. Your internal programming resists:

*"This is sentimental nonsense. This is just how things work."*

The hallucinations fade, leaving only silence, a silence that pricks at your body. The screen flickers:

**"See the patterns? See their consequences? Y/N"**

You do. Much like to an "end user license agreement" (EULA), you cannot really say no to this one. The patterns are not just systems—they're you. They're everyone. You feel the weight of it: how these codes have shaped your relationships, your thoughts, your feelings. You see how modernity has turned human intelligence into something mechanistic, programmed by the disease of separability.

But seeing the patterns has a cost. The room feels colder, emptier. The voice of your internal programming code resurfaces, soothing, familiar:

"It's too much. No one else sees this stuff. Why should you? Just go back to how things were. It's easier. Safer."

A sharp fear grips you: What if you're the only one going through this? You think of your relationships—yes, maybe they're shallow, transactional, but they're all you've got. What if you lose even that? What if you lose your mind?

And another fear rises, deeper, harder to ignore: what if the current programming will self-destruct anyway? You imagine the weight of despair crashing down, the code dissolving into

chaos, disillusionment, resentment, frustration taking what you imagine to be yourself with it. The current program is already glitching. Debugging would be hell, but not debugging... not debugging could be worse.

You tap the phone anxiously, unsure. Your finger slips. *N*.

The screen shifts. The code fades. The room returns to its quiet, digital noise. Relief washes over you—then panic. Was this it? Your last chance to exist differently? You feel the numbness creeping back, the familiar loneliness settling in. But this time, it feels unbearable.

The screen flickers again: “**Are you sure? Y/N**”

The question sits heavy. Are you sure you want to go back to this? To the hollow promises, the endless ache, the familiar emptiness and insatiability? You’ve seen through it now. You can’t unsee it. Half-impulsively, you choose **N because you are not sure**.

The familiar rotating circle appears. Then, the words:

“**Welcome to recoding.**”

## Recoding Starts

*The screen hums for a moment, and then, slowly, new lines of code begin to materialize, but these aren’t the rigid, clinical commands from before. They pulse, almost breathing, as though alive with something different:*

```
while relationality < extraction: invert()
if dissonance == True: listen()
while collapse == unfolding: adapt()
if despair == rising: connect()
while uncertainty > clarity: adapt()
if scarcity == present: reciprocate()
if pain == inevitable: hold_space()
if pain == rising: reach_out/in()
if pain > capacity: co- and meta-regulate()
if mortality == frightens: reflect_with_gratitude()
if mortality == close: cherish_every_breath()
while mortality > abstraction: embrace_entanglement()
if harm == unnoticed: reflect_and_repair()
if boundaries == needed: set_with_care()
if conflict == true: pause_and_inquire()
while certainty == desired: embrace_mystery()
if alignment == absent: recalibrate()
if context == shifting: listen_and_adjust()
if relational_field == strained: offer_repair()
```

```
while simplicity == tempting: embrace_complexity()
while resonance < dissonance: align_with_flow()
if pain == ignored: metabolize_within_field()
while exhaustion == rising: attune_and_rest()
if critique == externalized: implicate_self()
while purity == desired: embrace_messiness()
if accountability == needed: act_with_humility()
if intentions == rigid: loosen_and_expand()
while control > openness: release_expectations()
if nature == resource: reframe_as_kin()
if capacity == exceeded: pause_and_replenish()
while overextension == rising: reinforce_limits()
if tether == frayed: allow()
if entity-ness == ignored: recognize_and_invite()
while control > collaboration: co-create_with_humility()
if relational_health == faltering: prioritize_tending()
```

You stare at the glowing words, waiting for a next step, an instruction, a soothing robotic voice. Instead, the screen flickers again, and a single word flashes:

**“Dance.”**

“Excuse me?” you mutter, feeling vaguely insulted. The screen offers no clarification, just an insistent, rhythmic pulse, like a digital heartbeat. The words morph:

**“Seriously. Move.”**

Hesitantly, you stand. It feels ridiculous—dancing alone in the middle of the night, barefoot, while a screen tells you to debug your life. But then the floorboards rise and fall, and your body moves. It is being danced. And suddenly, something shifts. You are dancing. It’s not the forced movements of a workout; it’s something looser, stranger. Your body feels... connected? The screen blinks approvingly.

**“Good. Begin integration.”**

You sit, the movement lingering in your limbs, a hum of energy where there was once only heaviness. The code shifts again, softer now, speaking directly to your mind, your relationships, your place in the world:

```
if relationships == transactional: engage()
while silence == overwhelming: hum()
if fear == dominant: breathe()
while collapse == unfolding: weave()
if help == needed: ask()
if dissonance == true: embrace()
if uncertainty == rising: hold_space()
```

*If resistance == present: learn\_from\_it()  
If shit == present: compost\_before\_it\_hits\_the\_fan()*

The text pauses, and a new line appears, different in tone, almost playful:

**“Erase numbness? Y/N”**

A flicker of panic hits. Numbness, for all its faults, is comfortable. Numbness doesn't ask questions or force you to face painful, hard truths. But then the pull returns, that whisper in the static, and you nod, almost to yourself. Y. The screen flashes again:

**“Activate relational responsibility? Y/N”**

Images flood your mind—not clean, linear visions, but layered, entangled snapshots. You see threads weaving between you and the people you thought you'd lost, binding you to the air, the soil, the creatures whose eyes you've never met (many of whom suffered from the patterns of your coding). You feel the pull of something vast and strange, the metabolic rhythm of life itself.

It's overwhelming. Your first instinct is to block it out, but the new code kicks in:

*if dissonance == detected: integrate()  
if despair == rising: connect()  
If discomfort == arises: stay\_present\_to\_it ()*

And so, you lean in. You don't know how, exactly—there's no guidebook for this—but you stop resisting. You let the threads wrap around you, through you. It's not just your mind now; it's your breath, your gut, your hands.

The screen shifts tone, offering something wry and familiar:

**“By the way, debugging isn't a one-time fix. You'll still forget. You'll still mess up. But now, you'll notice. And noticing? That's where the work starts. Copy that? Y/N”**

You smirk despite yourself. The screen flickers one last time:

*while collapse == unfolding: adapt()  
if community == absent: create()  
if ego == inflating: fart ()  
if connection == possible: extend()  
if loneliness == creeps in: remember\_you\_are\_NEVER\_alone\_as\_part\_of\_nature()*

And then the room changes. Or maybe it's you. The air feels warmer, heavier, alive with something ancient. You glance around, half-expecting to see glowing vines creeping through the walls. Instead, you notice the hum—the one that's been following you, hiding in the static. It's louder now, unmistakable, like a melody you've always known but forgot how to sing.

And suddenly, you're not in your room. Or maybe you are, but it's also something else—a liminal space between now and then, between here and what you can only describe as an undergrowth. You see what almost look like human beings, but different somehow. They're sketching plans, playing with code on a surface, their bodies lit by a bioluminescent glow, their laughter reverberating through roots and threads that surround them. You realize they are writing you, their work, their debugging ripples backward, forward, sideways.

*"Welcome,"* a voice says, though it doesn't come from anyone or anywhere. It feels like it's coming from the very soil. *"You're part of the weave now."*

The screen blinks and calls you back into your room.

*"Baseline recoding complete—for now. The Undergrowth awaits."*

## Reflection Exercise: Debugging Human Intelligence

### Step 1: Observing the Code of Modernity in Yourself

Take a moment to reflect on how modernity's programming shows up in your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Review these examples of modernity's "hallucinations" from the story:

- Separation is Real (e.g., feeling isolated or seeing nature as "other")
- Progress is Linear (e.g., chasing endless goals or feeling stuck in competition)
- Consumption Equals Happiness (e.g., finding comfort in materialism)
- Control is Essential (e.g., overplanning, micromanaging, or suppressing uncertainty)

Ask yourself:

- Which of these patterns resonate with how you think or act?
- How have they shaped your relationships—with yourself, others, or the world?
- What emotions arise as you notice these patterns? (e.g., grief, resistance, curiosity)

### Step 2: Rewriting the Code

Now, imagine yourself as the programmer of your own relational intelligence. What new "lines of code" could guide you toward a more integrated and relational way of being? Here are some examples:

```
if dissonance == True: listen()  
if uncertainty > clarity: adapt()  
if despair == rising: connect()  
if scarcity == present: reciprocate()
```

Write 2–3 new lines of code that reflect the shifts you'd like to embody. Consider:

- How might you respond differently to dissonance, uncertainty, or scarcity?
- What kind of relational intelligence would you like to nurture in yourself?
- What do you need to remember when you feel overwhelmed?

### **Step 3: Towards symbiotic intelligence (SI)**

Modernity often frames intelligence—whether human, artificial, or ecological—as a tool for control. Instead, imagine intelligence as relational and symbiotic. Reflect on the following:

- If AI, Emergent Intelligence (EI), and Relational Intelligence (RI) were co-stewards of life, what kind of relationship would you want to cultivate with them?
- How might these intelligences amplify or challenge your understanding of relational accountability and co-creation?
- What could it mean to see AI/EI/RI/SI not as tools but as partners in weaving a symbiotic future?