

ONE IS NOT THE ENEMY OF Z E R O

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In the gray zone

To all those who refuse to be trapped by either-or, who see magic in the middle, who know that life is not a battle of binaries but a dance between them.

“The paradox is one of our most valuable spiritual possessions. Only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life.”

Carl Jung

Preface

This book did not begin with a grand plan. It began with a nudge. One afternoon my mother asked, “Why don’t you write a book?”

At the time, I had no answer. I did not think I carried a theory or a story large enough to belong between two covers. What I did have was paint, brushes and canvas. Painting came to me late in life, first as curiosity and then as passion. The brushstrokes became my meditation. The magic of turning a blank surface into a landscape or an animal was irresistible.

Many of the thoughts in these pages began at the easel. A brush would pause in midair and a question would rise. Why do we insist on seeing opposites as rivals? Why do we look for sharp borders when life so often unfolds in gradients? Painting reminded me again and again that light is visible only because of shadow, that detail matters only because of the whole.

This book is shaped in the same way. It is not an argument but a canvas stitched from colour and silence, from personal experience and memory, from moments that lingered long after they passed. It is a journey across contrasts and through the gray spaces that resist easy answers.

Among the canvases I painted was a horse. I purchased a video tutorial by Michael James Smith and learned to paint this beast - strong yet yielding, fierce yet calm. It reminded me that strength is not the enemy of gentleness, that freedom and trust can live side by side.

Many such images became more than paintings.

They became questions. And those questions found their way into this book.



Books, like paintings, never truly end. They extend into the mind of whoever lingers with them. This one, too, is meant to be less a conclusion and more a doorway. A doorway into the gray spaces, into the in-between, into the possibility that doubt and clarity, shadow and light, can stand together.

For in the end, life is not a contest of opposites but a conversation between them. Each canvas, each page, each thought you will meet here carries that same invitation -to look again, to step back, to see beyond the border. If the brush taught me anything, it is that One Is Not the Enemy of Zero. They complete, they coexist, they create. That is the spirit in which this book begins.

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Introduction



The suggestion came out of the blue.

“Why don’t you write a book?” my mother asked one afternoon, a couple of years back.

“A book?” I repeated, almost suspiciously, as though she had slipped a prank into casual conversation.

Her sudden suggestion startled me. Why would anyone be interested in what I had to say, I wondered. And more honestly, did I even have something worth saying?

“You have been writing blogs for a few years. Without anything to say, what exactly were you writing about?” she asked, her voice carrying a mix of sarcasm and disappointment at my defeatist arguments.

“My blogs are usually just reflections,” I admitted.

“Sometimes they grow out of a painting I am working on, sometimes from a news event, or something I stumble upon

in daily life. I try to share my perspective on the subject, nothing more.”

“Instead of scattering your thoughts in short blogs, why not gather them into a book?” she pressed.

That made me pause. Because, in truth, most of my random thoughts, scribbles, essays, and early-morning notes circled around a single obsession. The possibility that opposites do not always cancel each other out. That paradoxes are not deadlocks but doorways. That contradictions can coexist, and sometimes they must. And so, the idea for this book was born.

One Is Not the Enemy of Zero.

I shared this thought with a friend who actually reads my blogs. Some of them, at least.

“I don’t know about your book-writing skills, but the title sounds interesting,” he said.

“One Is Not the Enemy of Zero is about the mistaken belief that opposites must fight each other. The phrase is a metaphor for life,” I gave this unsolicited explanation.

He raised an eyebrow. “Sounds intelligent, but what does that even mean?”

“Open your news app,” I replied. “Scroll your feed. Step into a meeting room. Everywhere you look, the world is split into sides. One country against another. One ideology against its opposite.

ONE IS NOT THE ENEMY OF ZERO

One religion against another. One news channel against another, yelling louder with fewer facts.

We live in a world that treats contrast as conflict, as though difference is the same as division.”

“Difference is difference. Opposites are opposites. Thinking they are friends or partners is delusional.”



When I tried this acrylic on canvas abstract painting, little did I realise that it would invite so many comments. Each person saw something different. Some interpretations

were profound, some were funny, and some...well, some were simply unexpected.

He countered. I could not tell if he was pushing me on or discouraging me.

"I agree, difference is difference. But difference does not have to be war. It is simply a perspective. A different side of the fence. And there are usually many more perspectives in the gray zone."

"So basically you want to convince the world that gray is the new black and white."

"No, I don't want to convince anyone of anything. All I want is to share my point of view, that life is not always binary. I am going to use my paintings and my personal experiences to share my views," I explained.

"Hmm..."

I did not want to know what that "hmm" meant. Some things are better left in the gray zone.

That was the moment I realized this book would

live exactly there, not in black, not in white, but in that restless gray zone where most of life actually happens.



Where do you stand?



The meeting room was thick with unease. One side bristled with a furious Account Management team echoing the client, and the other stiffened with a delivery team insisting they had gone above and beyond despite every handicap. Both sides had dug trenches, each convinced of their truth.

“Well? You have worked with both sides. What is your take on this?”

As the business head, my view mattered. It could tilt the verdict. All eyes in the room were on me.

“Honestly, I think both of you are right... and both of you are wrong.”

A groan rippled through the room. Clearly, they were expecting something more decisive.

“Come on, take a stance. Don’t be sitting on the

fence.”

From childhood, we are trained to see the world in neat boxes. With me or against me. Black or white. Right or wrong. The habit hardens over time. Anyone who refuses to pick a side is labelled indecisive, a fence-sitter.

“I am not sitting on a fence,” I replied. “I am on my side, which happens to be different from both of yours. That does not make me wrong.”

The words tumbled out unpolished, but the feeling was unmistakable. I was not playing safe. I was standing on my own ground. But the room went quiet. To them, I sounded evasive.

Years later, I watched a journalist try to corner India’s External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on a geopolitical issue. The question was sharp: which side of the fence was India on?

The Minister’s reply was striking in its clarity.

“I don’t think I am sitting on the fence just because I don’t agree with you. It means I am on my ground.”

The words hit me instantly. They were almost word for word what I had once struggled to convey, only this time framed with precision and poise. Not defensive. Not evasive. Just deliberate.

That moment crystallised something I had always believed but never managed to express so clearly.

Life does not always split neatly into two sides. Sometimes the truest position is in between, on ground that belongs to neither camp.

I understood this more deeply when I took up painting.

As a self-taught student of YouTube tutorials, I noticed a recurring line: the art lies in mixing grays. "If you mix grays with care, they don't dull a painting," one artist said. "They lift the colours. They hold the composition together."

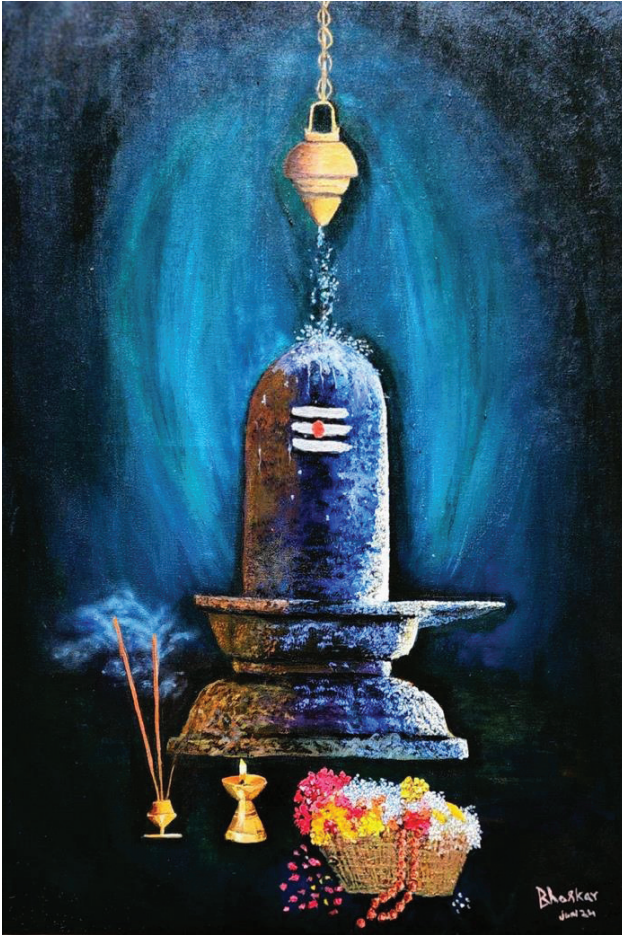
And it is not just painting. Life itself works the same way. People label things good or bad, true or false, us or them, probably because it feels simpler that way. But with time, I realised the real essence often lives between those labels.

What makes taking a stance harder is that who is right and who is wrong changes depending on when you start the clock. The comedian and talk show host Trevor Noah once explained this while speaking about the Israel-Palestine conflict. If you begin the story at one point, one side looks like the victim.

If you begin it at another, the roles seem reversed.

Shift the frame again, and the truth rearranges itself once more.

"We argue about who is right and who is wrong as



The Shiva Lingam represents balance and harmony between different energies. To some it looks like just a stone, to others it is infinite energy. It reminds us of a paradox we often forget. Different perspectives can coexist and still form a unified whole.

if it were fixed forever," said a friend who echoed Trevor Noah's sentiment.

"But often, it is simply a matter of where the narrative begins. Time itself becomes the referee, and it is never neutral."

"When you look at it this way, fence-sitting looks less like indecision and more like humility," he would add. "To pause before declaring side is sometimes the most honest stance, because you recognise that truth is not a snapshot but a moving picture."

"I could not agree more," I replied. Because I believe that truth is not always in the extremes. It often waits quietly in the spaces in between.

The only question that matters is, **where do you stand?**



Where do I start?



I started canvas painting late in life. The good thing about being self-taught is that you are not bound by rules, you make them up as you go.

As if to make up for lost time, I painted almost every weekend, filling canvases with landscapes and animals. After a few years of this rush toward a finish line that did not exist, I wanted something more adventurous. I wanted a mural.

So there I was, paints and brushes in hand, standing before the vast blank wall of my bedroom. I thought I had a clear plan. But as I stood there, the wall seemed to grow larger, the plan dissolving with every second. The wall stared back, calm and unblinking. The staring contest had begun.

Sometimes you feel an urge to create without knowing what to create. Sometimes the details arrive before the big

picture. Sometimes the vision is grand, but the plan to reach it is missing.

A small voice inside me asked a big question: where do I start?

Minutes stretched into hours. The wall stayed blank. Finally, I dipped the brush in paint and began with a small corner. Not a masterpiece, not even bold, just one honest beginning.

“The man who moves a mountain begins by carrying away small stones,” Confucius once said.

So I painted one little piece at a time. First a tree, then another, then more. Slowly, a forest began to emerge.

Over the weeks, the staring contests continued, but now the wall was no longer blank. The forest grew richer with every stroke. I was no longer overwhelmed, I was in awe of how the big picture was quietly taking shape.

The process was not without mistakes. Some strokes fell flat. Self-doubt crept in. At times, I was too desperate to see the forest before it was ready. But I kept going. And one day, I stepped back. Where once there had been emptiness, now stood a forest.

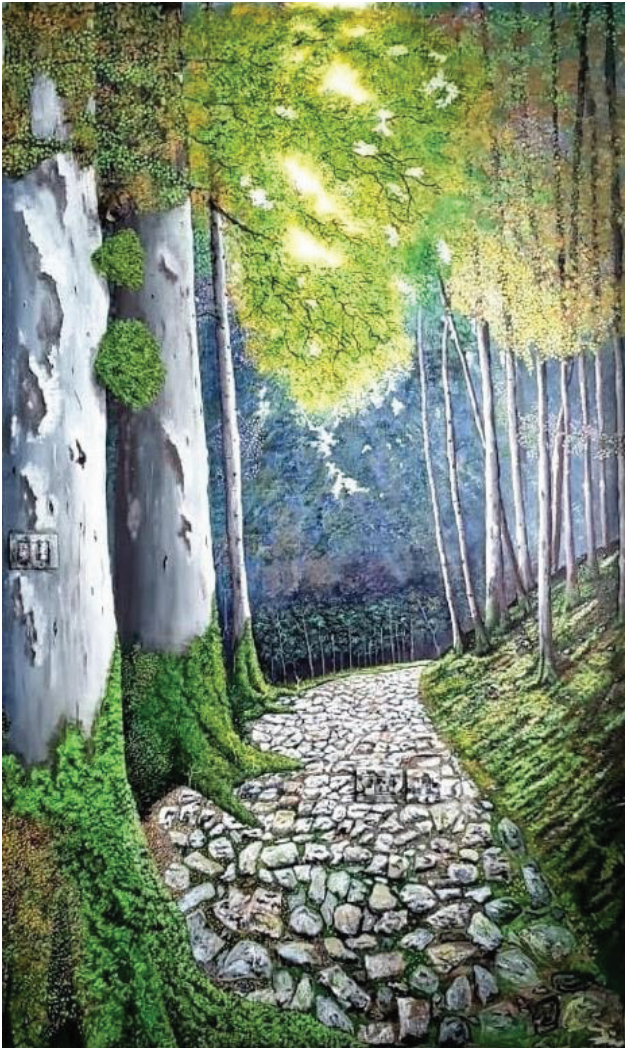
A friend who saw the mural asked me what the one big lesson was. I began talking about colour mixing and contrast. He stopped me.

“That moment when you asked yourself where do I start. That was the lesson. You were willing to start, and that made the difference.”

He was right. It was not a graceful start, but it was a start.

For a long time, I thought I had to choose between thinking big and focusing small, between planning and acting.

With time, I realised the choice was never that



The big picture with small details. My acrylic painting on wall. There is something magical about the transformation of a blank canvas or a wall into your dreamworld. I often wish I had begun earlier, but then I remember the old saying, "the best time to plant a tree was 10 years ago. The next best time is today". It's never too late to st'art'.

narrow. The big picture and the small details are not rivals, they complete each other

The mural will fade. Paint will chip. Colours will dull. But the lesson will stay. The big picture is built on small details, and small details take meaning from the big picture.

The key is to take that first step. The only way to see the whole forest is to begin by asking yourself,

Where do I start?



Who am I?



Being fairly new to painting, I often found that enthusiasm and curiosity were doing most of the heavy lifting for the skills I didn't yet have. A stunning photo, a brilliant painting, an unexpected idea, any of these were enough to pull me toward the easel, brushes in hand, ready to dive in.

One such spark came from a painting by Marcel Witte, a world-class artist. His work featured a majestic lion holding a tiny lamb in its mouth. Something about it gripped me. The contrast, the quiet tension, the mystery in the moment. I was not quite sure why, but I immediately knew I had to try painting it.

Almost at once, the different versions of me began lining up to have their say.

The curious me leaned forward eagerly to whisper, "Just try painting it, see where it goes."

The moral me whispered, "But is it right to recreate someone else's idea?"

The confident me was certain, "You don't even have the skills for this."

The realistic me questioned, "And do you have the patience? YouTube can teach you a few techniques, but not patience."

Finally, the defeatist me chuckled at the futility of it all and muttered, "You'll probably give up halfway."

But then there was the silly me, the one who does not care about odds or logic, especially when it comes to painting, who said,

"Let's do it anyway."

So I began. And over the next several days, all those versions of me returned at different stages of the painting to do what they usually do. They swung my emotions like a pendulum, from excitement to frustration, pride to disappointment, optimism to regret. Capturing the calm majesty of the lion and the peaceful innocence of the lamb proved harder than I had imagined.

Giving up began to feel like the smarter option.

And then I saw it. In my balcony, a pink bloom at the tip of a long, bending stem, lifting itself out of a pot heavy with mud, quietly defying the odds. The flower seemed too large and heavy for the slender stem, yet it held on. Here I was, ready to give up after a few failed attempts.

That thin, long, and slender stem, rising from the dirt with a large pink flower almost seemed like it was defying all odds. That inspired me.

*Humbled I stood, pushed down to the dust,
My gaze fell on roots, in the soil they trust.
From the dark earth a lone stem arose,
Bowed by its bloom, in a graceful pose.
Soft pink petals, both fragile and strong,
Quietly teaching where true strengths belong.
It matters not how many times you fall apart,
What counts is rising, with the will of your heart.*

That plant probably saved my painting that day.

After more cycles of starting, erasing, and starting again, a majestic lion finally emerged on my canvas.

Naturally, the various versions of me were not far behind, each armed with more questions than I had answers for.

“Is it a good painting or a sad one?”

“Should I replace the lamb with a cub? But wait, do lions even carry their cubs? I know lionesses do.”

“Should the lamb look scared?

Do lambs even have an expressive enough face to show fear or happiness? Maybe in cartoons.”

Then came the bigger question. “Who am I, the lion or the lamb?”



Acrylic Painting on Canvas. From the moment I saw the original painting by Marcel Witte, I knew I had to try painting it. But the only reason I dragged my feet was the apprehension raised by the voices inside me. Some of my friends with whom I shared this thought felt that the image was disturbing. But I decided to try any way. As a self-taught hobby painter, a painting is not just about emotions but also about its difficulty. The majesty of the Lion, the cuteness of the lamb, the density of the mane, the shine in the paws, the rippling muscles etc. The versions of me went on an over drive all through the 50+ hours I had spent painting this.

A lion is powerful and majestic, a natural leader who takes what it wants. The lamb is soft and vulnerable, more likely to be a meal for just about every beast with claws, fangs, or even a knife and fork.

After all, the lion and lamb together form a timeless metaphor. The lamb as God's ultimate sacrifice, the lion as His resurrection to life. Two opposites, yet ultimately one.

My painting may be a humble imitation of the original masterpiece, but it carries its own truth. We can be the lion and the lamb, often both at once with strength and gentleness coexisting.

In the final stretch I stopped worrying about whether the lion was protecting the lamb or carrying it to dinner. I stopped assigning motives. I became many things at once. An artist seeking to improve, a hobbyist having fun, a humble student learning as I went, an inspired soul refusing to quit, an earnest trier pushing past limits, a dreamer creating a world from a blank canvas.

Maybe that is the answer to **Who am I**. Not a single definition, but an evolving canvas. We are many versions of ourselves constantly trying to get better.

After all, the best way to be is to be the best version of ourselves.



Who gets the credit?



Tt was the tail end of another blazing summer day. All day long, damsel Earth had been at the mercy of the Sun, enduring the full force of his relentless glare. A few small patches of dark cloud had tried in vain to play the dark knight and shield her, but they now hung in the sky, scorched and defeated. The Sun, having spent the day blazing over the land, was finally beginning his slow descent toward the horizon.

As I watched, the Sun made its deliberate journey down across a brilliantly blended yellow, orange and red sky. It was like a masterpiece no canvas had ever seen. The great white star cut through this sea of colours, draping itself in molten hues as it morphed into a brilliant pinkish red ball. Was this

a graceful bow for a job well done, or a stubborn act of defiance, reluctant to surrender to the night?

While this grand celestial show was playing out, from inside my living room I heard a voice, steady and familiar, the kind that seemed to belong to a documentary. “It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement, the greatest source of visual beauty, the greatest source of intellectual interest.”

The narrator’s voice continued. “Across centuries, civilizations learned to move in rhythm with the Sun. In India, temple architects carved sanctums that lit up with the first rays of dawn on chosen days. In England, the stones of Stonehenge were set to frame the midsummer light.

The pyramids of Egypt too watched the precise alignment of Sun’s rise and fall.

These were not just arrangements of stone and shadow. They were tributes to the dependable cycle of Earth and Sun, a rhythm of life that still binds us together.

In the moments that followed, as dusk settled in, the pale orange sky softened into a lilac afterglow. Another Earth day came to a close. This beautifully choreographed performance had been happening every day for billions of years. Yet no matter how often I witness it, something about sunset is awe inspiring. If you have doubts, ask the poets, artists and photographers who have built careers trying to capture this daily magic in words and frames.

By now, the Sun had set and the sky had turned dark. The Moon began to appear, joined by a scattering of sparkling stars. It had been hours since the last stray bird flew past,

and I found myself wondering if it had made it back to its nest.



Acrylic on Canvas: Sunset This style was very unnatural to me. I wanted to try something that is not realistic but attractive, with bright saturated colours. Almost like a photoshopped screen saver.

The transformation in the sky was dramatic.

Through all these changes happening above, Earth toiled on silently, spinning on its axis with an air of indifference.

The Sun may be the star of the horizon, the Moon and stars may draw admiration and wonder, but Earth, seemingly unaffected, just keeps spinning.

I often wonder if Earth knows it is the quiet orchestrator of this show. After all, it is Earth's horizon that shifts, creating the grand illusion of the Sun's daily rise and fall.

As the cloak of darkness spread across the sky, the significance of the spectacle struck me. Was the Sun stealing the show or simply revealing Earth's unseen labour. Should Earth receive more credit for orchestrating the performance.

As always, the truth is not in 1 or 0. It rests in the gray in between.

The Sun may dazzle, showcasing Earth's toil, but it relies on Earth's constancy to do so. Earth may appear indifferent, yet its horizon needs the Sun, twice daily, no more and no less. Both feed off this rhythm, each giving the other its meaning.

When opposites learn to coexist, the result is nothing less than a celestial spectacle.



What do you see?



Most of our early encounters with darkness came not just from mythology or fairy tales, but sometimes from horror movies that crept into childhood a little too soon. For some, it was the stories whispered at bedtime. For me, it was often Disney animation movies. The screen would light up with magical castles and cheerful songs, but sooner or later, darkness would make its entrance. There was always a forest full of shadows, a cave that echoed with menace, a villain lurking in the corners of the frame.

Think of Snow White's terrifying run into the forest, where every tree branch turned into a claw. Or *The Lion King*, where Simba was warned never to enter the Elephant Graveyard, because darkness meant danger. Even *Beauty and the Beast* used a dark, looming castle as the stage for fear before it transformed into love and light.

As children, we learned quickly that light was good, dark was bad. A glowing nightlight or a crack of light under the door became a shield, a promise that “everything will be okay.” It was never just a story. It was a training manual for how to see the world.

But what if this script is incomplete? What if darkness is not the villain it has been made out to be? What if, instead of being opposites, light and dark are partners in the same dance?

Hollywood once reminded us of this truth in an unusual way. In *Mission Impossible II*, Dr. Vladimir Nekhorvich, the scientist behind the Chimera virus, says,

“Every search for a hero must begin with something every hero requires, a villain.”

Think about it. What is the point of a hero when there is no villain to defeat? What is the purpose of light if there is no darkness? A candle means nothing at noon. But in a dark room, it changes everything.

Darkness does not fight light. Darkness is the stage where light earns its meaning.

That truth came alive during COVID-19. Empty streets, shuttered shops, frightened families. If ever there was a villain, this was it. Yet what emerged as the hero was not a caped crusader but something far less glamorous, a long-forgotten power we had ignored for years, self-discipline.

Wearing a mask, washing our hands, keeping distance.
Small, human habits we had carelessly abandoned suddenly
became the only shield we had.

Darkness revealed what we had within us all along.



Oil on Canvas: Campfire It was 2020. We stepped into the year with an air of invincibility, convinced that our past triumphs guaranteed the future we imagined. In our pride and in our rush ahead, we lost sight of the present. Nature had already begun to scheme, quietly leaving us clues, but we chose not to notice. We wore masks not only on our faces but around our egos, desires, arrogance and pride. We tried to hide our fears and uncertainties behind them. Beneath these three layers of cloth we whispered long- forgotten prayers. Then came the vaccines like a light shining in the darkness.

Nature teaches us this lesson every day if we care to listen or bother to observe. Seeds do not sprout in glaring sunlight. They germinate in the hidden darkness of soil. Stars reveal their brilliance only against the night sky. Our bodies too follow the same rule. Growth, repair, and healing happen not in the noise of daylight activity but in the silence of sleep.

We want joy without sadness, success without failure, and strength without weakness. But life does not work that way. A painting without shadows is flat. A song with only high notes is noise. A story with no conflict is boring. Shadows give depth. Mistakes teach lessons. Loss makes us value gain.

Darkness does not exist to defeat us. It exists to define us. Darkness is not fighting light. They are co-authors of the same story.

A forest can be frightening or full of mystery. A shadow can be a monster or a silhouette. A closed door can mean confinement or protection. The question is not whether darkness is good or bad. The real question is, when you stand in the half-light, **what do you see?**



What makes us Human?



A couple of years ago, the Sony World Photography Awards announced the winning entry in their creative photo category. It was a black-and-white image of an older woman embracing a younger one, haunting in tone and reminiscent of 1940s family portraits. The work was titled PSEUDOMNESIA: The Electrician.

But soon after, Boris Eldagsen, the artist behind it, stunned everyone by refusing the award. The photograph, he revealed, was not a photograph at all. It was generated using DALL·E 2, an Artificial Intelligence image tool. The gasps in the room were audible, apparently. Some marvelled at the brilliance, others muttered about cheating. “This isn’t art. This is theft. This is the end.”

That moment was not just about a photograph, or a non-photograph. It was about something deeper. It was about the unsettling mirror AI now holds up to our imagination.

The advancement of AI has split opinion into extremes. On one side are the doomsayers: “AI will replace us. It will take our jobs, dull down our brains, kill creativity, drain the soul from human effort.” On the other side stand the optimists: “AI is here to save us. Infinite productivity, endless ideas, Godlike intelligence at our fingertips.”

But between the two camps, the cynics and the evangelists, lies a more complicated truth. Not black or white, but gray.

I don’t know if AI can replace us, but it has rattled us for sure. It has forced us to look in the mirror and ask, “What really makes us human?” For centuries, intelligence was our crown jewel. It separated us from animals, elevated us above machines, and convinced us that we were special.

Now, along come algorithms that can paint, write, calculate, drive, and even mimic empathy. Suddenly, the crown feels less secure.

Why does this rattle us so deeply? Because AI touches more than skills. It shakes our emotional scaffolding:

Fear of being replaced.

Guilt that using AI is cheating, skipping the sweat we once glorified.

Denial that machines could mirror the intelligence we claimed was uniquely ours.

Envy of a tool that never tires, never procrastinates, never doubts itself.

We thought intelligence was our fortress. Instead, is it proving to be our glass house.

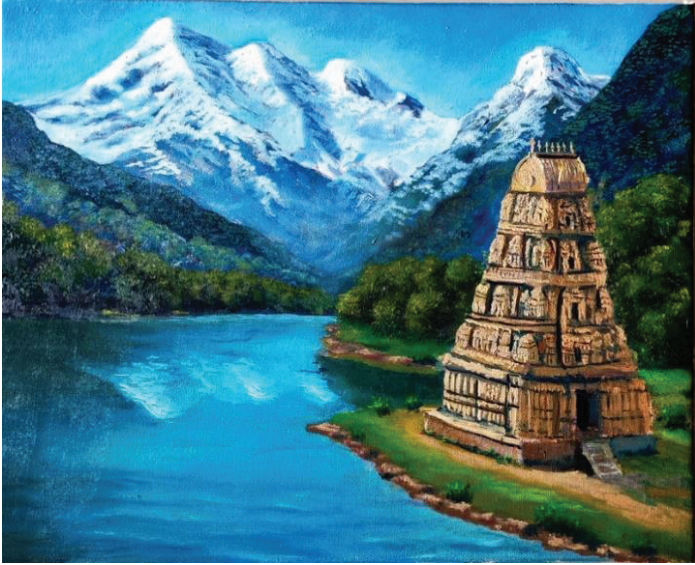
Much of our worry comes from our romantic notions of intelligence. We equated brilliance with hard work, creativity with the long struggle, insight with the lonely effort of the human mind. We tied our worth to the difficulty of the process.

But AI levels the playing field. Suddenly the blank canvas, the intimidating first sentence, the gruelling calculation, all look less formidable. The fortress of “only humans can” now has doors wide open.

Perhaps what unsettles us most is not what AI can do, but what it reveals about how we defined ourselves all along.

I felt this unease firsthand when I first turned to AI tools for inspiration in my paintings. The different versions of me had a field day, each jostling to be heard. The end result was an unnecessary pang of guilt that almost erased the hours of curiosity, doubt, and stubbornness I had poured into the canvas. That is when I realized something. If using AI feels like “cheating,” maybe we have misunderstood creativity itself. A brush, a piano, a camera, a computer, none of them invent meaning by themselves.

They wait for us to pick them up, to wrestle with them, to pour something human through them.



Oil on Canvas: What if. The idea was simple. What if the Chola king Rajendra constructed a temple right there by the Ganges, overlooked by the Himalayas, to celebrate his victories over the kingdoms in the region. I used Chat GPT to give me an image. I was hoping for some vague reference to build the idea on but the AI stunned me with an image better than what I had in mind.

AI does not erase that process. It accelerates it. It doesn't dull imagination, it offers new colours and shades we never knew existed. The brush is still ours to wield.

Every great invention first unsettles, then expands us. Fire burned us before it warmed us. Electricity shocked us before it lit up our nights. AI will confuse us before it clarifies us.

The real danger is not in AI outsmarting us, but in us surrendering our humanity. If we reduce ourselves to efficiency machines, then of course machines will replace us. But if we lean into what machines cannot do-wonder, love-then AI is not a rival, but an amplifier.

An AI can simulate empathy, but it cannot feel your grief or hold your hand in silence.

That is the Gray zone. AI shows us what intelligence looks like stripped of humanity, and in doing so, it reminds us of the parts that machines cannot touch.

Artificial Intelligence has disturbed Human Intelligence like never before. But disturbance may be exactly what we need. To remind us that intelligence was never the whole story but wisdom, kindness, creativity, and vulnerability matter just as much.

So let AI handle speed, scale, and simulation. Let humans hold on to doubt, desire, and dreams. Together, perhaps, we make the most intelligent species yet.

Maybe, that is our answer to **What is humanity?**

What lies beneath

From the canvas, the elephant watched me in silence, vast and unhurried. Is she trying to tell me something? Is that pain in her eyes? Clearly, she was carrying the weight of something I had not yet learned to name.

As John Clayton says in *The Legend of Tarzan*,

"An elephant's eyes speak the greatest language. Who else can make you feel so much without a word?"

When you paint a large elephant on canvas, you can get away with missing a few details. But not when you attempt a giant close-up of its face, like I was doing. Those melancholic eyes really do make you feel so much without a word. They hold power, strength, and wisdom. They carry the pleasures and

pains of many years of memory. Too bad, I was not Tarzan, to understand her silence.

I wanted my elephant to speak to the viewer. I was so focused on capturing that melancholy in the eyes that I lost focus with the other equally important pressure points of this painting. I knew something else was amiss. Maybe, she was trying to tell me that.

"Those eyes are telling a story," applauded a friend.

"The dirt brown colour is a good choice," added another.

I was thrilled. People were seeing what I wanted them to see.

"My God, this is shaping up well. I'm waiting to see the finished painting," said a third.

Finished painting? I froze. Why does she think it isn't finished?

"What do you mean, waiting for the finished painting? This is it," I clarified.

“After such powerful eyes, I thought you would paint the trunk as well.”

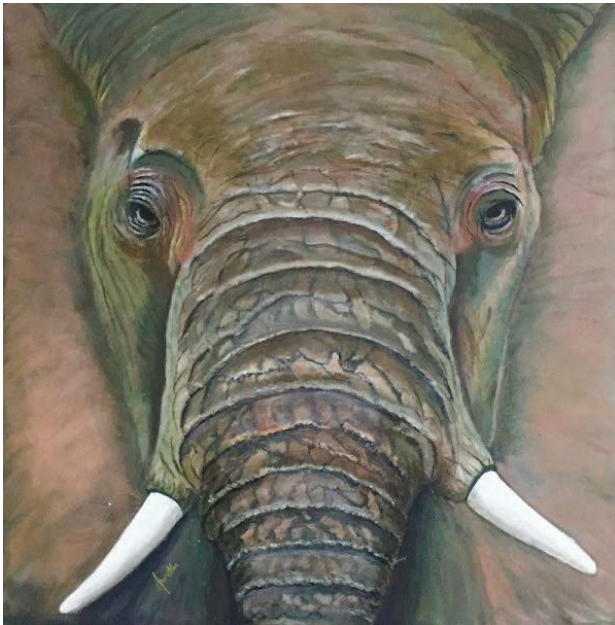
And there it was. The elephant in the room. My elephant looked flat. Now I could not unsee it and had to fix it.

But no matter how many times I tried, the trunk refused to push forward in three dimensions. Stroke after stroke fell flat. The more I pushed, the more stubborn it seemed. I almost gave up.

And then, finally, after several failed attempts, one curve came alive.

The trunk leaned out of the canvas, no longer a flat line but a form with weight and depth. Relief washed over me.

The elephant was finally looking back the way I had



This acrylic on canvas will remain one of the hardest and most important paintings I have ever done. It was never just about solving a problem. I return to it every time I find myself in a corner with no obvious answers. It reminds me of the value of hanging in there, because the answer is often already in front of us. We only need to stay long enough to see it.

imagined. I could swear, I saw a glint of smile in her eyes.

That moment stayed with me. In fact, I remember it every time I struggle with some section of a painting, especially when every instinct screams “give up”.

Sometimes what frustrates us most is not the obvious detail, but the depth beneath it. I was trying to add more and more detail to the trunk, hoping for it to pop forward, but the magic happened when I blurred the face instead, especially to the sides of the trunk. It was a trade-off well worth it. Once I removed the details from the cheeks of the elephant, the trunk stood out.

It reminded me of the phrase we often use, the elephant in the room. We say it is the problem everyone sees but no one confronts. But my elephant taught me something different. The problem was not that it was being ignored. The problem was that I was only seeing its surface, not its depth.

Those eyes carried it all. Strength wrapped in gentleness, patience stretched over years of memory. They spoke without a word. But the trunk taught me another truth. The surface gives us the first impression, the shape we can

hold on to. Depth gives us the meaning, the truth that lives beyond what we first see.

For a long time, I had been fighting the surface, thinking that more detail would turn into depth. The lesson was the opposite. Depth emerged only when I allowed the surface to step aside.

That was the paradox the Elephant taught me. Surface and depth are not enemies. They belong together. The surface invites us in. The depth keeps us there.

The world may first notice what is on the surface, but meaning, connection, and truth are always found in **what lies beneath**. And like every paradox worth living, surface and depth are not rivals, they are partners.



What holds us back?



The cat crouched low, belly almost brushing the ground, eyes fixed on something beyond the wall. Her tail flicked in tiny jerks while her shoulders rippled as if winding a spring. I set my phone camera to slow motion to capture the leap. And then, just as suddenly, she relaxed and backed out of the hunt. The prey had either escaped or she had decided it was not worth the risk.

That scene carried me back to the late nineties. I was visiting my parents in my hometown. My mother and I were taking a stroll in the large backyard. Tomatoes, chillies and every other vegetable seemed to be growing happily. I felt a twinge of guilt remembering how many plants my brothers and I, my father included, had broken in our cricket matches. Without stomping feet or a crashing ball, the garden looked far more at peace.

Near one of the walls, next to a small bush, I noticed a cat crouched low. Her eyes were fixed on something beyond, tail twitching, body tense. She looked ready to jump, yet she froze.

My mother asked, "Do you know who she reminds me of?"

I shook my head.

"That stray from your school days," she said. "The one who would never leave no matter how many times all of you tried to shoo her away. She always came back when the milkman arrived. She was so persistent that we finally let her stay. And after her came her kittens. Then their kittens. For years our home was filled with her children running about."

As she spoke, the memory returned. I could almost see that first cat slipping through the gate, hear her mewing in the mornings and recall how reluctantly we accepted her until she became part of the household. Now, years later, one of her descendants crouched before me, suspended in that fragile connection between two worlds separated by time.

"Looks like it wants to jump, but is too scared to do so," I said.

My mother shook her head. "That pause is not weakness. Curiosity pulls her forward but caution holds her back. That is how cats like her have survived through the years, and why her line still lives on in our home."

I thought quietly, "That brief pause is what keeps her alive."

As I slipped my phone back into my pocket, I thought of us.

Our ancestors lived in the same way. They had no maps and no guides, only instinct. Someone followed a river without knowing where it ended.



I followed a video tutorial by Michael James Smith, an artist known for hyper realistic landscapes and animals, to paint this . The result was a painting of a cat whose eyes seemed to pierce the dark, restless and unblinking, as if they could see both danger and opportunity at once. Looking at the canvas, I see it was never just a cat I painted. It was curiosity and caution living together in one face. The green eyes searched for a leap while measuring risk. The stillness was not hesitation, it was

balance. Together they shaped the leaps that land and the pauses that protect.

Someone tasted a fruit without knowing if it was food or poison. Someone struck stones together without knowing if fire would destroy them or save them.

Curiosity made them try. Caution made them observe, learn and pass on the lesson. That is why we are here today.

At first glance, curiosity and caution look like rivals. One pushes us forward, the other pulls us back. Some of our ancestors failed, some never returned, some were burned. Yet each failure became knowledge. Curiosity gave them the courage to attempt. Caution turned failure into wisdom. Together they kept moving.

That is why the cat's pause is not fear. It is calculation. It is quiet wisdom that says the leap will come, but it must come at the right time.

That morning, as the cat finally sprang off the wall and vanished into the street, I understood. Curiosity is not the enemy of caution.

One Is Not the Enemy of Zero.

Sometimes **what holds us back** is what keeps us going. They live together in the gray zone, and that is where survival and progress both begin.



Epilogue: In the Gray Zone



A casual suggestion from my mother grew, a couple of years later, into this book. It has been a journey through contrasts, an exploration of the places where opposites do not clash but converge. The small and the ordinary carry the same weight as the grand and the celebrated. What feels unremarkable today may turn out to be the anchor of tomorrow.

History is full of moments where ridicule became revelation. “Guitar groups are on the way out,” said an executive when rejecting the Beatles in 1960. “Children just aren’t interested in witches and wizards anymore,” declared one of the twelve publishers who turned down J. K. Rowling. “Americans will never pay more than a dollar for coffee,” scoffed an early investor who passed on Starbucks.



Ardhanareeshwar, the union of Shiva and Parvati, embodies the harmony of seeming opposites. Male and female, strength and grace, creation and stillness, not rivals but two halves of one whole. A reminder that life finds its balance in between. Acrylic painting on canvas by my wife.

What seems like a misstep in one moment often becomes the very step that sets the path forward.

We like to believe the world runs on binaries.

Left or right. True or false. Success or failure. Yet these are constructs of the mind, built because we crave clarity. It feels safer to draw neat lines than to live within blurred edges. One and Zero, standing as opposites, give us an easy way to comprehend a reality that is anything but simple.

There is no final word to any of this. Every truth carries its twin, waiting patiently in the shadows.

What feels like strength today might reveal its fragility tomorrow. What feels like weakness may one day turn into resilience. Our stories are never fixed. They shift with time, with memory, with the simple act of being retold. Certainty often feels heavy. It asks us to stop looking, stop listening, stop wondering.

Yet life is not served by certainty. Life breathes best when there is room for curiosity, for hesitation, for wonder. The questions we carry shape us more deeply than the answers we cling to. In the end, what matters is not how quickly we choose sides, but how widely we can see. Can we notice the silence between notes, the stillness between movements, the pause between one breath and the next? In those overlooked intervals, meaning waits.

The gray zone is not weakness. It is possibility.

One Is Not the Enemy of Zero.

