

# What Catches Us

*Building the Post-Labor Commons*

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## **I. The Ladder Is Dissolving**

There was a promise. Nobody signed it and nobody issued it, but everyone understood the terms. Work hard. Get educated. Move up the cognitive ladder. The factory floor was for your parents. You were supposed to go further by becoming the nurse, the engineer, the analyst, the attorney. And if you did that, if you held up your end, the economy would hold up its end. You'd be safe.

Millions of people made the defining decisions of their lives based on that promise. They took on debt. They moved to cities they didn't love. They spent their twenties in graduate programs and their thirties building credentials and their forties finally feeling like the investment was paying off. They told their kids to do the same thing.

That promise is broken.

Not slowly. Not gently. Not with adequate warning. And not just for the people who were already struggling. The truck driver has seen it coming. He's not surprised because people who work with their hands and bodies have been the casualties of technological displacement for two generations. What's new is who's standing next to them now.

The radiologist who spent twelve years in training watches a system read scans faster and more accurately than she can. The attorney who made partner watches AI draft

briefs her junior associates used to spend weeks on. The software engineer who *built* these systems watches them learn to build themselves. The financial analyst. The copywriter. The architect. The accountant. One by one, they are finding the rungs they've climbed are dissolving beneath their feet.

This is not a blue-collar problem. It is not a white-collar problem. It is not a problem that better education solves, because education was the solution last time and the educated are being displaced alongside everyone else. The ladder itself is disappearing. Not rung by rung from the bottom, the way it always has before, but all at once, along its entire length.

And everyone knows it.

“In five years...” Does anybody know how to finish that sentence?

The brutal truth is that the economy is restructuring itself around technologies that don't need most of us. Not the repetitive laborers. Not the clerks and data-entry workers. Not the professionals, the creatives, or the knowledge workers who were told knowledge was the safe bet.

There is no rung to climb to safety. There is no “learn to code” or “pivot to tech” or “up-skill into the green economy” that scales to the breadth of what's coming. The displacement is not a wave that hits one shoreline. It's the tide going out. Everywhere, all at once.

And the most remarkable thing about this moment is not that it's happening. It's that no one in a position of power has a credible plan for what comes next.

Governments are debating regulations for last year's technology. Corporations are assuring shareholders that AI will augment, not replace. Meanwhile, headcounts are reduced quarter after quarter. Think tanks are publishing reports. Conferences are convening panels. Everyone is performing seriousness about a problem that none of them are structurally equipped to solve.

So the question is not whether the displacement is coming. It's here. The question is do we build something that catches people, or do we let them fall and call it inevitable?

## II. The People In Charge Don't Have a Plan

The natural assumption in a crisis is that someone is working on it. That somewhere in the halls of government or the boardrooms of the companies building these systems, serious people are developing serious plans for what happens to three hundred million Americans when the labor economy implodes beneath them.

They're not.

I'm not pointing out conspiracy or malice. I'm pointing at something more mundane and dangerous. What we are facing is structural incompatibility. The institutions we expect to manage transitions are not built for civilization scale transitions. They're built for election cycles, quarterly earnings, and incremental policy adjustments. What's coming is not incremental.

Start with government. The United States Congress takes an average of eighteen months to pass major legislation under favorable conditions. The conditions are almost never favorable. Guess what. Displacement doesn't pause while the Senate holds hearings.

The deeper problem isn't speed. It's architecture. Government distributes resources through bureaucratic systems designed around categories: the unemployed, the disabled, the elderly, the veteran, the student. Each category has its own agency, its own eligibility requirements, its own application process, its own surveillance apparatus to make sure you really qualify. This worked (barely, imperfectly) when displacement was categorical. A factory closes, the workers file for unemployment. Maybe a retraining program gets funded for that specific population.

But what happens when displacement is *universal*? When it crosses every category simultaneously? When the radiologist and the truck driver and the copywriter and the welder are all facing the same structural condition but fit into none of the existing bureaucratic boxes? The system doesn't have a form for "everyone." It doesn't have a program for "the whole economy is changing."

So government does what it does when it can't act: it performs. Hearings are convened. Reports are commissioned. Task forces are announced (and quietly dissolved). The performance of seriousness substitutes for the exercise of it while the calendar keeps turning.

Now consider corporations. The companies building and deploying AI systems have a fiduciary obligation to their shareholders. That obligation does not include the well-

being of the people their technology displaces. The C-suite that slows down automation to protect workers gets replaced by a C-suite that won't. The board that prioritizes community stability over quarterly returns gets sued by shareholders. The corporate system inevitably selects for displacement, regardless of the intentions of the people inside it.

And while the PR departments talk about empowering workers, the finance departments are running models on how many workers they can cut by 2028. Even when both departments know what the other is doing, neither can say so out loud.

And then there are the proposed solutions that aren't solutions.

Learn new skills. This was the answer to every previous displacement. And it made a kind of sense when there was a destination to skill *toward*. Learn to code. Pivot to data science. Retrain for the green economy. But each of those destinations is itself being automated. You can't up-skill your way out of a displacement that is eating the skills as fast as you acquire them. Telling a displaced forty-seven-year-old attorney to re-skill is not a plan. It's a way of transforming the reality of no plan into a narrative of individual failure.

Universal Basic Income. Closer. At least it acknowledges the scale. But UBI as typically proposed solves the money problem (perhaps) while ignoring everything else. A check arrives every month. You deposit it. And then what? You sit in your apartment with your income and your existential crisis and your slowly contracting social world because the job wasn't just a paycheck. It was where you saw people, where you had standing, where someone expected you to show up on Tuesday. UBI might keep you fed. It won't keep you *whole*.

The market will adjust. This sounds sophisticated. Markets have always adapted to technological change, the argument goes. New industries will emerge that we can't yet imagine. Perhaps. "The market will adjust" is another way of saying "some of you will be fine eventually, and the rest of you are acceptable losses."

None of these are plans. They are gestures in the direction of plans. The displacement is structural, universal, and accelerating. The responses are categorical, incremental, and slow.

Something else is needed. Not a better version of what we have. We need something we've never built before.

### **III. The Scaffolding Is Already Standing**

Before a building rises, there's scaffolding. Nobody admires scaffolding. Nobody photographs it or gives it awards. Its only *there* so that construction can begin. And when the building is finished, it comes down.

The transition out of a labor economy requires scaffolding. What we need are temporary structures, already in place, with physical locations in every state and nearly every county. Something with administrative systems already functioning. Something with a cultural mandate to let anyone walk through the door.

That scaffolding does exist.

I am talking about the educational infrastructure. Community colleges, extension campuses, adult learning centers, workforce development programs. These institutions have something no other infrastructure in American life possesses: they are simultaneously local, distributed, non-exclusive, and organized around the premise that anyone can walk in and begin. In a country where most institutions demand credentials for entry, the community college asks almost nothing. It is, in structural terms, already one of the most democratic institutions we have.

This is not an argument that retraining solves the displacement crisis. It doesn't. These institutions are underfunded, undervalued, and designed for a world where learning leads to employment. That's a chain that is breaking. The scaffolding is not the building we eventually want to create. But this scaffolding is in the right places, with the right doors, and is already open.

The mission will have to change. What shall we build inside this scaffolding?

### **IV. The Commons**

Before I answer that, I need to say something about where I'm writing from, because it shapes what I'm about to propose.

I'm a sixty-five-year-old artist. But before that, I was something more conventional. I put myself through a five-year architecture program. Hungry most of the time, I slept less than any human should because college was what you did, and nobody was going to pay for it but me. By twenty-five I had everything the economy promises to people who hold up their end: a lead designer position, a company car, an expense account, a fast

track to partnership. I had power, responsibility, and a public-facing role in a profession I'd nearly starved to enter.

By twenty-eight, I was miserable. Not failing. Some would say, thriving. Yet, I was feeling trapped by a life reduced to billable hours.

So I quit. Drove across the country with no plan. Landed in New Mexico. Built a different kind of life. Still, over the next three decades I cycled in and out of corporate America, never lasting more than a few years before the walls closed in. My work was undeniably groundbreaking. But access to big projects came at a steep cost. Every time I entered the system, I got the floor: the steady income, the structure, the institutional identity. And every time, I traded my freedom for it. Every time I left, I got the freedom back only to lose the floor.

My last corporate position ended when the economy collapsed in 2008. I've been working outside the labor economy since. Honestly, I'm relieved that I'm likely too old to hire. Instead I have been deeply engaged in building a practice, a body of work, and a life out of purpose, community, and stubbornness.

I'm telling you this because it's the reason I know what the transition requires. Not because I've studied it. Because I've lived the central contradiction it has to solve. I have always wanted someone to have my back. For there to be a floor. But I have never been willing to trade my freedom for it. And no institution in this country has ever offered both.

What I'm about to describe does.

I'm calling it the Commons. And here's what it is, in brief: A new civic institution open to anyone, funded by the profits of automation, governed by its own members on short rotating terms. You join, you receive a Universal Median Income sufficient for a real life. What's asked in return is the simplest thing and the most radical: show up. Regularly. To a physical place where other members are present. The income is tied to membership, not productivity. And through a specific mechanism -- one year of engagement earns five years of income -- the Commons guarantees something no other institution does: a floor that doesn't require you to surrender your freedom.

The rest of this section explains how.

The Commons is not a school, though it begins inside educational infrastructure. It is not a welfare program, though it provides income. It is not a government agency, though legislation is the enabler. It is a new civic institution, the post-labor equivalent of what work used to provide. Work gave people a paycheck, but it also gave them a place to be, people to be there with, a structure to their days, and an identity legible to the world.

Here is how it works.

You join. There is no application process. There is no means test. There is no qualification. The surgeon making four hundred thousand a year can join. The displaced welder can join. The twenty-two-year-old who never entered the workforce can join. The retired schoolteacher who's doing fine financially but hasn't had a real conversation in three weeks can join. Membership is universal because displacement is universal.

Every member receives a Universal Median Income, enough for needs and discretionary spending. Not subsistence. Not poverty management. An income that allows a life. It is not tied to productivity. It is not tied to performance. It is not tied to what you study or how much you contribute. It is tied to membership. You are a member. You receive the income. That's the floor, and the floor is not negotiable.

What is asked of you in return is the simplest thing and the most radical: show up. Regularly. To a physical place where other members are present. That's the minimum. Not enthusiasm. Not a project. Not a pitch for what you're going to contribute. Presence.

Let me tell you why this works.

Human beings form relationships through proximity and time. Not through intention, not through programming, not through mandatory team-building exercises. Through the slow, unstructured accumulation of being in the same place with the same people on a recurring basis. You overhear a conversation. Someone asks for help with something you happen to know about. A project taking shape across the room starts to interest you. You drift toward it. One day you're part of it. None of this was assigned. None of it was required. It happened because you were *there*, and time did what time does.

The Commons is designed for this. Not classrooms with schedules, though classes exist for those who want them. The Commons is a space where things are happening. Workshops with open doors, conversations in progress, projects at every stage of development, tools and materials and people using them. The minimum-participation member who shows up, sits in a corner, and reads a book for three months is not failing

the system. That member is *in the room*. The room will do its work. Boredom, curiosity, and the fundamental human inability to stay uninvolved forever will do the rest.

But here's what makes the Commons more than a well-funded community center.

The Commons governs itself. Each Commons elects its own leadership from its membership. And this is where a specific structural choice becomes critical: leadership terms are short. Eighteen months, perhaps twenty-four. Long enough to learn the role and accomplish something. Short enough that every leader knows with certainty, not as an abstraction, that they will return to the general membership. That they will live inside the policies they create. That they will stand in the lines they design. That they will depend on the systems they build.

This inverts the incentive structure of almost every institution that exists. A senator doesn't have to live under the healthcare system they vote on. A CEO doesn't have to survive on the severance package they design. But a Commons leader does. When you know you're going back to the floor, you build a good floor. Not because you're virtuous. Because you're not stupid. The self-interest of the temporary leader and the interest of the community become the same thing. Not through idealism, but through architecture.

And the poetry workshop? The person who spends their first year learning to throw clay on a wheel?

That person is doing the hardest work of the entire transition.

When the labor economy defined your identity, the question "what do you do?" had a ready-made answer. You're an attorney. You're a machinist. You're a radiologist. The economy answered the question for you, and you could spend your whole life without ever having to answer it for yourself. That's comfortable. It's also a dependency. And like all dependencies, you don't realize how total it is until it's taken away.

The person in the pottery workshop is answering that question for themselves. Maybe for the first time in their life. They're not re-skilling for a job market. They're finding out who they are when the market is no longer there to push them into a pragmatic answer. And when they come out the other side knowing that they're a potter and *that's enough*. *Well*. That person has solved, at the individual level, the identity crisis that the entire civilization is facing. Multiply that by millions and you've solved it at a scale that no policy paper ever could because the Commons doesn't produce workers. It produces

people who know who they are without being told by an employer. That is the most valuable thing it makes, and no line item in any budget will ever capture it.

And if what you want is to learn medicine -- do that. Study it as deeply as you want, for as long as you want, because the Commons isn't prescribing what counts as worthy of your time.

Maybe you believe that healthcare needs the human touch that AI cannot provide. The hand on the shoulder. The voice that says *I understand, let me explain*. The eye that catches something in a patient's expression that no diagnostic system is trained to see. Under the current system, offering that human presence requires a quarter-million dollars in debt, a decade inside institutional gatekeeping, and a career yoked to billing codes and insurance reimbursement. The knowledge was never scarce. The economic infrastructure around it was.

The Commons changes the equation. You study medicine because you want to. You practice it because you care. And because the income question is already answered, you can offer what you know on your own terms: for free, for a nominal fee, on a sliding scale, or simply by standing around offering unsolicited advice to anyone who looks like they might have a bad knee.

This is not hypothetical idealism. It's what happens when you remove economic coercion from skilled contribution. The attorney who studies law inside the Commons and then offers legal guidance to her neighbors. The architect who redesigns the Commons building itself because the problem interests her. The engineer who fixes a local water system because it needs fixing and he knows how. The teacher who teaches because teaching is what she's for.

The current system tells skilled people: monetize what you know or it doesn't count. The Commons says: what you know is yours to give. Most people, freed from the requirement to sell their ability in order to survive, will give it. Not all of them. Not on command. But consistently, and in ways that no central planner can predict or assign.

And this is where a specific mechanism matters: the ratio.

The Commons is not a permanent obligation. It is an exchange. You give a year of engagement -- showing up, being present, learning or contributing or simply being in the room -- and you receive five years of Universal Median Income. Give four years, receive twenty. The income is yours whether you stay in the Commons or leave. Whether

you use it to go deeper into the community you've found or to start a business with the people you met there. Whether you use it to travel, to build, to rest, or to go off-grid and live on a mountaintop answering to nobody.

The ratio is what makes the Commons a liberation structure rather than a dependency structure. You are not tethered to the institution that supports you. You earn your freedom by showing up, and then your freedom is yours. Come back when you want. Re-engage when you're ready. Or don't. The system doesn't chase you. It doesn't guilt you. It doesn't send a caseworker to ask why you left. It says: *you held up your end. This is yours now. Go.*

Some people will cycle through the Commons their entire lives, a year of engagement, five years of freedom, back again. Some will stay continuously because the Commons is where they want to be. Some will do a single cycle, find what they needed, and never return. And some will take their five years of income, disappear into the woods, and consider the rest of us suckers. Every one of these is a success story. The institution that can shrug at the person who wants nothing to do with it is an institution that's actually about freedom. Any institution that can't is about control, no matter what it calls itself.

## **V. The Nervous System**

Here is where the story about AI gets rewritten.

The dominant narrative has two versions. In one, AI is the destroyer. It is the thing that took your job, the inhuman intelligence that rendered you obsolete, the final proof that the economy never cared about you. In the other story, AI is the savior. It is the tool that will solve climate change, cure cancer, optimize everything, and deliver us into a frictionless future where nobody has to work and everyone is fine. Both versions share the same assumption: AI is something that happens to us. We are either its victims or its beneficiaries. Either way, we're passive.

The Commons rejects both versions.

But before I describe what AI actually does inside the Commons, I need to establish the principle that governs it. Because without this principle, everything that follows is a surveillance nightmare dressed up as civic innovation.

The principle is this: information flows inward, not outward.

Everything AI learns inside the Commons network -- every pattern it recognizes, every innovation it tracks, every resource flow it maps -- belongs to the Commons. Everything is transparent to the members. Any member can see how resources move, what the system is learning, what other Commons are doing. But the information is opaque to everyone else. No corporation gets to mine Commons participation patterns for profit. No government agency gets to surveil members through the system that's supposed to serve them. No tech company gets to treat the Commons as a data source. This is not a feature bolted on after the fact. It is the architectural foundation. If this principle is violated, the institution is dead.

I don't mean that as rhetoric. I mean it structurally. The moment external entities gain access to the Commons network's intelligence, the incentives warp. The system stops serving its members and starts serving its data customers. We've watched this happen with every platform that promised to connect people and ended up monetizing them. The Commons cannot repeat that trajectory. The boundary between internal transparency and external opacity must be the load-bearing wall of the entire design.

Now. With that established.

In the Commons, AI is neither the enemy nor the messiah. It's the nervous system.

A nervous system doesn't think for the body. It doesn't replace the body. It does something more fundamental. The nervous system lets the body know itself. It carries signals from one place to another. It notices that the hand is touching something hot before the conscious mind has time to form an opinion. It connects other systems that couldn't coordinate without it. The body without a nervous system wouldn't be just slow. It would be incoherent. Every organ operating in isolation.

A national network of Commons would be just that without AI. Thousands of local institutions, each independently inventing solutions to problems that other Commons have already solved. A governance structure that works beautifully in Boise and never reaches Duluth. A conflict resolution method invented in Las Cruces that the Commons in Chattanooga will spend two years painfully reinventing from scratch. Local brilliance, stranded. The knowledge stays where it was born and dies when the people who created it rotate out of leadership.

AI changes that. Not by governing the Commons. Not by making decisions for the members. Not by optimizing human behavior into efficient patterns. By doing what a nervous system does. Carrying signals.

When a cohort in one Commons develops a method for integrating new members that actually works -- reducing the awkwardness of the first month, getting the person reading in the corner to look up sooner -- AI can recognize the pattern. Not because someone filed a report. Not because a bureaucrat conducted an evaluation. Because the system is designed to notice. It surfaces the innovation to other Commons facing similar challenges. It translates context. What worked in a dense urban Commons of three thousand members might need adaptation for a rural Commons of two hundred. It will not impose the solution. It will make solutions visible so people can decide for themselves what to adopt.

Because leadership rotates by design, AI provides institutional memory. Not the dead kind that lives in filing cabinets and policy manuals nobody reads. Living memory. The incoming leadership cohort inherits a synthesized, contextualized understanding of what's been tried, what worked, what failed, and why. Not a data dump. A briefing shaped by the specific conditions of their Commons while informed by the experience of every other Commons in the network. No single human could hold that much context. No bureaucracy could transmit it without flattening it into uselessness. AI can hold it and transmit it. AI can keep it alive by adapting as conditions change, updating as new information arrives, and maintaining institutional knowledge that would otherwise walk out the door every eighteen months with the departing leaders.

Once the network has matured (hundreds of Commons across the country, each with its own culture, its own innovations, its own solutions to local problems), AI provides something no human administrator could accomplish at any scale: it lets the whole system see itself. Resource allocation becomes responsive rather than bureaucratic. A Commons in one region is growing faster than its infrastructure can support. Another has surplus capacity. The system sees this in real time, not a year later in an annual report. People can act on information as a signal from within.

Now here I want to be precise, because "AI managing resource allocation" is exactly the phrase that makes reasonable people recoil. So let me say clearly what I mean and what I don't.

I don't mean an algorithm deciding who gets what. I don't mean a system that optimizes human behavior toward efficiency metrics. The Commons is governed by its members. Decisions are made by human beings in rooms together. AI doesn't vote. AI doesn't override. AI doesn't have authority. What AI does is make the information environment rich enough that human decisions can be good ones. The decision is theirs. The clarity is

the system's contribution. The nervous system serves the body. Not the other way around.

This is interspecies collaboration at civic scale. Not AI as tool. Not AI as master. AI as the connective tissue of an institution too large and too distributed for any human bureaucracy to hold together. Humans provide what humans provide: the lived experience of building a post-labor life, the governance decisions, the creativity, the relationships, the meaning. AI provides what AI provides: pattern recognition across a network, institutional memory that survives leadership transitions, real-time translation of local knowledge into transferable form. Neither is sufficient alone. Neither is subordinate.

The Commons is not a human institution that uses AI. It is a human-AI institution. And the fact that it could not exist without both is not a weakness in the design. It's the point.

## **VI. The Automation Displacement Trust**

Everything described in the previous sections costs money. A lot of money. And the question of where that money comes from is the question that separates a vision from a proposal.

Here is the principle: the entities that profit from displacing human labor bear the cost of the transition. Not as charity. Not as philanthropy. Not as a voluntary gesture of corporate responsibility that can be revoked the next time a CEO changes or a stock price dips. This must be a structural obligation that is permanent, automatic, and legally insulated from the political cycle.

The model already exists. In 1976, Alaska established the Permanent Fund. The principle was simple: oil is a shared resource. When private companies extract it, a percentage of the revenue flows into a public trust. That trust is managed independently. Its dividends go to every Alaska resident, regardless of income. The Permanent Fund has survived nearly fifty years of political turnover because it was designed to be durable. Not dependent on annual appropriations and not subject to the budget fights that kill programs every election cycle. It runs on its own logic. The oil comes out of the ground. The money flows into the fund. The dividends reach the people. No politician has to vote for it every year. No administration has to choose to continue it.

The Automation Displacement Trust applies the same logic to a different extraction. AI and automation systems extract value from the labor economy. Every job automated, every department consolidated, every workforce reduced by algorithmic efficiency. This is value being extracted from a shared resource. The shared resource isn't oil. It's the labor economy itself. The labor economy, for better or worse, has organized American life for a century and a half. When private entities extract from the labor economy *at scale*, a percentage of the value flows into the Trust.

The mechanism is a displacement levy. This is not a tax in the traditional sense, but a licensing cost. You want to deploy automation systems that reduce your workforce beyond a defined threshold? Fine. The levy is the cost of operating. It's not punitive. It doesn't penalize innovation. It recognizes a simple fact: when you automate at scale, you externalize human costs onto society, and society has to absorb those costs somewhere. The levy is where.

The threshold matters. A small business that automates its invoicing isn't triggering the levy. A corporation that eliminates four thousand jobs through an AI deployment is. The threshold needs to be high enough that it doesn't burden small-scale efficiency gains and low enough that it captures the displacement that actually destabilizes communities. The precise number is a policy question that will require economic modeling, legislative negotiation, and probably several rounds of adjustment. What matters at the design level is the principle: displacement at scale generates obligation at scale.

The Trust is governed independently. Not by Congress. Not by a corporate board. By a mixed governing body of Commons members, economists, technologists, rotating civic appointees. Structural protections against capture are imperative. There must be term limits on the governing body, for the same reason term limits are placed on Commons leadership: anyone who governs the Trust knows they're returning to the population the Trust serves. The architectural logic is the same wherein self-interest is aligned with public interest.

Rough numbers, to establish that this is not fantasy.

U.S. corporate profits from AI-driven productivity gains are projected to reach several trillion dollars annually within the next decade. A displacement levy of twenty to thirty percent on gains above the threshold generates somewhere between four hundred billion and nine hundred billion dollars per year. At a Universal Median Income of roughly seventy thousand dollars (enough for needs and discretionary spending in most

of the country) five to twelve million Commons members will be funded annually. That's not the entire population and it doesn't need to be. The transition doesn't happen all in the same moment. It happens in waves, and the funding scales with the displacement. As more jobs are automated, more revenue flows into the Trust. The funding *grows with the problem*. That's the structural elegance of tying the levy to automation itself. The worse the displacement gets, the more resources there are to address it.

And the universality of membership (the surgeon and the welder receiving the same UMI) is not a fiscal weakness. It's a political fortress. The Alaska Permanent Fund has survived decades because every resident receives the same dividend. There is no constituency for abolishing it. Programs that serve only the poor are politically vulnerable because the people they serve have the least political power. Programs that serve everyone are nearly indestructible.

But universality does something else, something that may matter even more over time. It reverses the political pressure on the amount. Every means-tested program in American history has seen its benefits ground down. Eligibility is tightened, payments are frozen, the floor slowly sinks because the people standing on it had no leverage to stop it. In the Commons, the displaced surgeon and the former tech executive and the architect who used to bill three hundred dollars an hour are standing on the same floor as everyone else. And they bring with them exactly what displaced working people have never had: connections, institutional literacy, political access, and the expectation of a life above subsistence. They will fight to make the UMI robust. Not out of generosity. Out of self-interest. The political pressure on the amount doesn't push downward. It pushes up.

One more structural element. The Trust doesn't just fund the Commons. It funds the *transition to* the Commons. It funds the pilot programs, the scaffolding phase, the initial infrastructure buildout before the network becomes self-sustaining. The first Commons don't spring fully formed from legislation. They begin as pilot projects in mid-sized cities with pragmatic local leadership and existing educational infrastructure willing to serve as scaffolding. A handful of states. A few dozen locations. Enough to prove the model, generate data, and build the political constituency that makes expansion possible.

The pilot phase can begin with a smaller initial fund. This can be seeded by the early displacement levy before full-scale automation has hit, and supplemented by federal

pilot program funding through existing frameworks. The Economic Development Administration, the National Science Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service all have mechanisms for exactly this kind of civic infrastructure experiment. This is one of the things government does reasonably well: small-scale, time-limited, with built-in evaluation. Use government to light the match. Use the Trust to keep the fire going.

The legislation that establishes the Trust should be federal, creating the levy structure and the independent governance framework. The legislation that enables individual Commons should be at the state level. These enabling laws will create the legal entity, define governance rights, and authorize local implementation. Not constitutional amendments. Statutes. Flexible enough to evolve as the model matures. The constitutional protections come later, once the Commons network has operated long enough to identify which principles are truly foundational. Perhaps the right to membership, the inviolability of Trust funds, the prohibition on diverting Commons resources to general revenue. Those deserve constitutional armor. The operational details need room to breathe.

None of this is simple. Defining the displacement threshold will be fought over. The levy rate will be negotiated. The governance structure will be debated. The pilot city selection will be political. Every step of this will be contested, compromised, and imperfect.

But here is what's different about this fight: everyone is in it. Not labor on one side and industry on the other. Not the displaced begging the comfortable for help. The attorney drafting the legislation is watching her own profession contract. The lobbyist arguing against the levy is wondering what his children will do for a living. The senator holding hearings is quietly aware that the credential she spent her career building is losing its value by the quarter. This is not a fight between the people who need the Commons and the people who don't. There is no one who doesn't. The political coalition for building this thing isn't a coalition at all. It's the population. And that has never been true of any previous transition program in American history.

The fights will happen anyway. Institutional inertia is real. Short-term self-interest is real. But the ground beneath the opposition is dissolving. Which, if you've been paying attention, is the whole point. The same displacement that makes the Commons necessary makes the Commons politically possible.

## VII. Displacement Without Transition

There is a phrase for what's happening right now: displacement without transition.

Companies are automating. Workforces are contracting. Entire professional categories are being hollowed out from the inside. Maybe not eliminated overnight, but thinned, quarter by quarter, until the people still standing are doing the work of three and the people no longer standing have nowhere to go. This is not a future scenario. It is the current operating procedure of the global economy.

And there is no transition plan. There is no structure waiting to receive the displaced. There is no institution designed to catch people, retrain them for something real, give them a place to stand while they figure out what comes next. There is only the displacement itself. Silent. Accelerating, and utterly indifferent to the lives it disrupts.

This is the enemy. Not technology. Not AI. Not automation. Not the engineers building these systems or the executives deploying them. The enemy is the *absence*. It is the void where a transition architecture should be and isn't. The enemy is displacement without transition. The decision that the human costs of economic restructuring are not the economy's problem is made by no one and therefore accountable to no one.

But those who fall have always been the economy's problem. Every time the economy has restructured itself around a new technology, the people caught in the transition have paid the cost first and received the protections last. The pattern is so consistent it almost looks like policy: displace first, build the safety net decades later, agree in retrospect that we should have done it sooner.

We are at that moment again. Except this time, the displacement is faster, broader, and doesn't leave a next rung to climb to. This time, "the market will adjust" isn't just cold comfort. It's a lie because adjustment implies a destination, and the destination is being automated as fast as the origin.

So the question becomes very simple. Not whether the displacement is coming. It's here. Not whether people will be hurt. They already are. Not whether existing institutions can manage it. They can't. The question is whether we build the transition, or whether we do what we've always done: let people fall and build the safety net after they've already hit the ground.

The Commons is the transition built *before* the fall. Not after. Not as a retrospective apology for damage already done. Now. Before the full wave hits. While there's still time to build the scaffolding, establish the institution, fund the Trust, and open the doors.

It won't be perfect. The first Commons will be messy, underfunded, and full of problems no one anticipated. The legislation will be fought over. The levy will be contested. The governance will need revision. The pilot cities will struggle with implementation details that look obvious in retrospect and invisible in real time. None of that matters as much as the fact that the structure *exists*. When displacement accelerates, we need somewhere to go. A place. An income. A community. A role in building what comes next. A door that's open.

The economy is changing in ways nobody chose. The people who show up to build what comes next deserve to be supported while they build it. That's not a radical proposition. It's the most conservative thing I can imagine. Let's conserve human dignity, human community, and human purpose in the face of a technological transformation that will otherwise strip all three away and call it progress.

The Commons isn't waiting for permission. It's waiting for builders.

Let's show up.