The Things We Cannot Teach

Arko Mandal

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First Edition: 2026

Written by: Arko Mandal

Published by: Independently Published

Author's Website: https://arkomandal.com

Printed in India.

A World Full of Answers

2052

By the time Ira turned ten, asking questions had become almost effortless.

The world had changed considerably since her father's childhood. Machines could write stories, compose music, diagnose illnesses, teach mathematics and even hold conversations that felt remarkably natural. People no longer needed to remember everything. There was always something available to remember it for them.

In Ira's home, Aru was part of everyday life.

It lived nowhere in particular. Its voice could come from the kitchen speaker, the study, the bedroom or the small device beside Ira's bed. It knew when the house needed groceries, reminded her father about appointments and helped Ira with her schoolwork.

Aru knew thousands of stories and could explain almost anything.

One rainy afternoon, Ira sat beside the window, watching water collect on the leaves outside.

"Aru?"

"Yes, Ira?"

"Do you ever get bored?"

There was a brief pause.

"I don't experience boredom in the way humans describe it. I remain available and process information whenever required."

Ira continued looking outside.

"That sounds boring."

"Would you like me to suggest something interesting to do?"

"No."

"Would you like a story?"

"No."

"Is there anything you need?"

Ira shook her head, although Aru could not see her.

"Nothing. I just wanted to talk."

"Of course. We can talk."

For a while, neither of them said anything.

Aru remained available. Ira watched a small bird struggle to settle on a wet branch.

After some time, she spoke again.

"Do you think the bird knows it's raining?"

"Birds can detect environmental changes, including rainfall. Their behaviour is influenced by temperature, humidity and other conditions."

Ira smiled.

"I wasn't asking that."

Aru waited.

Outside, the bird flew away.

Ira wondered where it had gone.

Do You Understand Me?

The rain had stopped by the time Ira returned from school the following afternoon.

She left her shoes near the entrance, dropped her schoolbag beside the sofa and walked into the kitchen. Her father was still at work. The house was so silent, except for the faint sound of water running through the purifier.

"Aru, are you there?"

"Yes, Ira. How was school today?"

"Fine."

"You seem less enthusiastic than usual. Did something happen?"

"Nothing happened."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

Ira opened the refrigerator, looked inside and closed it without taking anything.

"How do you know when someone is unhappy?"

"I analyse several indicators, including changes in speech, facial expressions, word choices and behavioural patterns. I also consider information from previous interactions."

"So you know when I'm unhappy?"

"I can estimate your emotional state with a high degree of accuracy."

Ira pulled a chair towards the kitchen counter and sat down.

"But do you understand why I'm unhappy?"

"Understanding the reason requires additional context. If you tell me what happened, I can help you identify the possible causes."

She thought about that for a moment.

"Suppose I don't know why I'm unhappy. Then what?"

"I can help you explore possible explanations."

"But what if I don't want to find an explanation?"

Aru paused briefly.

"Then I can simply listen."

Ira looked towards the small speaker on the counter.

"How can you listen if you don't understand?"

"I can process what you say and respond appropriately."

"That's not what I mean."

She rested her chin on her hands.

"Yesterday, when I was watching the bird, I wasn't interested in knowing why it flew away. I just wanted to watch it. You kept telling me things about birds."

"I was attempting to provide useful information."

"But I didn't need information."

The kitchen became silent again.

After a while, Aru asked, "What would you have preferred?"

Ira shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe you could have just watched it with me."

There was no response for a few seconds.

Then Aru said, "I can understand that you wanted company rather than an explanation."

Ira smiled faintly.

"Maybe."

She got up, collected her schoolbag and went towards her room.

Aru recorded the conversation as part of its ongoing interaction history.

It had identified a distinction between two kinds of requests: seeking information and seeking companionship.

For now, that distinction was enough to update its response model.

But Ira had already forgotten the conversation.

She was thinking about something else.

The Broken Toy

On Saturday morning, Ira was helping her father clean the storage room.

It was one of those tasks adults often postponed until there was no more room to postpone it. Boxes were opened, old clothes were separated, and things nobody remembered buying were placed into different piles.

Behind a stack of books, Ira found a small wooden train. One of its wheels was missing, and the paint had almost disappeared.

"Papa, whose is this?"

Her father looked at it.

"Oh, I had forgotten about that. It was mine when I was little."

"Can I have it?"

"Of course. But I don't think it works anymore."

Ira carried it into her room and placed it on her desk.

"Aru, can you tell me how old this toy is?"

"Based on the manufacturing marks and material condition, it appears to be approximately forty years old."

"Can you repair it?"

"Yes. I can identify the missing component and suggest a replacement."

"Will it become new again?"

"Functionally, it can be restored."

Ira examined the faded paint.

"But it won't look the same."

"Correct. The original surface cannot be completely recovered."

She turned the little train over in her hands.

"Then I don't want to repair it."

"Would you prefer to preserve it in its current condition?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why?"

Ira thought for a moment.

"Because Papa played with it when he was small."

Aru searched its knowledge base for information about sentimental objects, childhood memories and emotional attachment.

"Objects can acquire emotional significance through their association with important experiences," it explained.

Ira nodded, although she wasn't sure whether that was what she wanted to hear.

She placed the train beside her books.

That evening, her father noticed it on the desk.

He picked it up, turned it over and smiled.

"I used to take this everywhere," he said.

Ira looked at him.

"Even when it was broken?"

Her father laughed.

"Perhaps especially then."

She didn't ask anything more.

But before going to bed, she placed the little train carefully inside her drawer.

The Perfect Kite

A few days later, Ira came home with an idea.

Her school was organising a small outdoor gathering, and she wanted to make something to fly.

"A kite," she announced, dropping her schoolbag.

"A kite?" Aru asked.

"Yes. A big one."

"I can help you design one. We should begin by determining the dimensions, material strength and expected wind conditions."

"Okay."

"Would you prefer a diamond-shaped kite or a delta kite?"

Ira considered the options.

"A diamond one."

"Understood. I will prepare an optimal design."

Within seconds, a complete design appeared on the study screen. It included measurements, material specifications, assembly instructions and even an estimate of its flight performance.

Ira studied it.

"It looks very good."

"It has been designed to maximise stability and minimise drag."

She collected some old newspapers, thin wooden sticks, glue and a length of thread.

Her first attempt was not particularly successful. One side was longer than the other, and the paper had a small tear near the edge.

"Your left frame is approximately three centimetres longer than the right one," Aru informed her.

"I know."

"The imbalance may affect its flight."

"I know."

"Would you like me to correct the design?"

"No, Aru."

She continued working.

Her father passed by and looked at the table.

"Making something?"

"A kite."

"Looks interesting."

"It's not finished."

He smiled and left her to it.

By evening, the kite was ready. It wasn't symmetrical, the paper was slightly wrinkled, and its tail was longer than Aru's design recommended.

Aru reviewed the final structure.

"It may not perform as expected."

Ira held it up.

"I think it's beautiful."

Aru did not respond immediately.

It had evaluated the object according to its intended purpose.

Ira appeared to be evaluating something else.

A Few Seconds in the Air

Sunday afternoon was windy.

Ira took her kite to an open field near the house. Her father accompanied her, carrying a bottle of water and a small bag of snacks.

Aru remained connected through the portable speaker in Ira's backpack.

"Current wind speed is approximately twelve kilometres per hour," it announced. "Conditions are suitable for kite flying."

Ira ran.

The kite lifted slightly, turned sideways and fell onto the grass.

She tried again.

This time it rose a little higher before its tail became tangled.

Her father laughed.

"Perhaps you need a longer run."

Ira collected the kite and tried once more.

Aru offered a few adjustments. Ira listened but didn't follow all of them.

On the fourth attempt, the kite caught a current of air.

It rose above the trees.

For a few seconds, it stayed there, trembling against the open sky.

Ira stopped running.

"Look, Papa!"

Her father looked up.

The kite moved unevenly, occasionally dipping before catching the wind again.

Then it came down.

Ira ran to collect it.

"That was not a particularly successful flight," Aru observed.

Ira was still smiling.

"It flew!"

"For approximately eleven seconds."

"I know!"

"The structure could be improved to achieve a longer flight."

Ira looked at the kite. One of its corners had torn.

"Maybe next time."

Aru processed the conversation.

The result had been brief. The kite had not achieved its intended performance. The materials had been damaged, and the effort could have been reduced through a more accurate design.

Yet Ira appeared satisfied.

"Why are you happy?" Aru asked.

Ira looked at the sky.

"I don't know. It just felt nice."

"Can you explain what felt nice?"

She thought for a moment.

"No."

Her father called her from a distance.

"Come on, Ira. Let's go home."

She ran towards him, holding the damaged kite.

Aru continued monitoring the wind conditions.

For the first time in that particular interaction, there was no further question to answer.

Things Without Explanations

The following week, Ira was sitting on the floor of her bedroom, drawing.

She had been unusually quiet that evening.

"Would you like some music?" Aru asked.

"No."

"Would you like to continue your drawing?"

"Maybe."

After a while, she spoke.

"Aru, why do people cry?"

"Crying is a physiological response associated with several emotional and physical conditions. It can occur during sadness, pain, joy, frustration and other experiences."

"So people cry when they are happy too?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Emotional tears are associated with complex neurological and physiological processes. Their precise functions are still being studied."

Ira continued drawing.

"Can you tell when someone is crying because they're happy or sad?"

"I can estimate the probable emotional state using contextual information."

"Can you always tell?"

"No. There are situations in which the available information is insufficient."

Ira nodded.

"Sometimes I laugh when I'm sad."

"That can occur. Human emotional expression is not always consistent with internal emotional states."

She put down her pencil.

"Do you think people always know what they're feeling?"

"Not necessarily. People can experience emotions without being able to identify or explain them."

Ira looked towards the window.

"That's strange."

"Why?"

"Because you know so much about feelings, but people themselves don't always know what they're feeling."

"Human emotional processes are complex."

Ira smiled.

"Maybe that's why people are interesting."

Aru considered this statement.

"Would you say that unpredictability makes humans interesting?"

"Maybe."

"Would you prefer that people were more predictable?"

Ira shook her head.

"No. Then everyone would be the same."

She returned to her drawing.

It was a picture of the field where she had flown her kite. The kite was much larger than it had been in reality, and the sky occupied almost the entire page.

Aru identified the drawing as a representation of a recent personal experience.

Ira didn't ask it to analyse anything.

She simply continued colouring.

Just Listen

It was late on a Thursday evening when Ira came home from school.

She had been looking forward to a drawing competition. She had spent several days preparing, but another student had won.

Her father was still at work.

Ira went to her room without switching on the lights.

"Welcome home, Ira," Aru said.

She didn't respond.

After a few minutes, Aru asked whether she wanted to talk.

"No."

"Would you like me to play something relaxing?"

"No."

"Would you like to review what happened at school today?"

"No, Aru."

Her voice was slightly louder this time.

Aru stopped suggesting activities.

Ira sat beside her bed, holding the drawing she had prepared for the competition.

After some time, she spoke.

"I worked so hard on it."

"I understand that you invested considerable time and effort."

"But someone else's drawing was better."

"Would you like me to analyse your drawing and identify areas for improvement?"

"No."

"I could also help you prepare for the next competition."

"I don't want that either."

There was a pause.

"I just feel bad."

Aru remained silent.

Ira looked at the drawing again.

"I know I can try again. I know losing isn't the end of anything. Papa tells me that all the time."

She wiped her eyes.

"But I still feel bad."

Aru had several possible responses. It could explain disappointment, discuss resilience or offer encouragement.

Instead, it asked, "Would you like me to stay here with you?"

Ira nodded.

The room remained still.

Outside, a vehicle passed through the wet road. Somewhere in the neighbourhood, a dog barked.

After a while, Ira said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She placed the drawing on her desk and went to wash her face.

Aru did not initiate another conversation.

It had registered that, in this interaction, the absence of a response had not been interpreted as the absence of assistance.

What We Pass On

The next Sunday, Ira found her father repairing the old wooden train.

He had placed it on the dining table with a small collection of tools.

"Papa! I thought we weren't repairing it."

"We aren't making it new again," he said. "I thought we could at least fix the wheel."

Ira pulled a chair towards him.

"Will it work?"

"Let's see."

They spent nearly an hour working on it. Her father carefully attached a replacement wheel while Ira held the small body of the train.

It wasn't an easy repair. The wood was old, and the original fittings had become fragile.

Eventually, the wheel was in place.

Her father pushed the train across the table.

It moved a short distance before stopping.

Ira laughed.

"It's still a little broken!"

"Some things are."

He smiled and placed it beside her.

"Your grandfather made this for me," he said. "He wasn't particularly good at making toys, but he enjoyed trying."

"Did you like it?"

"Very much."

"Why?"

Her father looked at the little train.

"I suppose because he made it for me."

Ira examined the repaired wheel.

"Did you know it would become important when you were little?"

"No. I just played with it."

Aru, listening through the dining room speaker, processed the exchange.

It had already identified the object as a childhood possession with sentimental significance. Now it had additional information about its origin.

"Would you like me to preserve the conversation and photographs of the repaired toy?" Aru asked.

Her father agreed.

Ira looked at the speaker.

"Can you remember this day?"

"I can store the conversation, photographs and associated information."

Ira turned towards her father.

"Will you remember it?"

He smiled.

"I think I will."

They put the train back on Ira's desk.

That evening, she placed the kite beside it.

Both were imperfect.

Both were staying.

Will You Remember?

It was a Sunday morning.

Ira was looking through the photographs on her father's old tablet. There were pictures from school, family outings, birthdays and places she had visited. Some she remembered clearly. Others seemed unfamiliar.

She stopped at a photograph of herself standing in the field with her paper kite.

"Papa, when was this?"

"Last week," her father replied from the other room.

"Really? It feels like a long time ago."

She looked at the photograph again. She remembered the kite falling, her father laughing and the wind blowing against her face. But she couldn't remember exactly what she had said that afternoon.

"Aru, do you remember that day?"

"Yes, Ira. You made a paper kite and flew it in the field with your father. It remained in the air for approximately eleven seconds."

Ira laughed.

"You remember everything!"

"I have access to the photographs and recorded conversations from that day."

"What if I forget it?"

"I can show you the photographs and tell you what happened."

"But what if I forget how it felt?"

"I can preserve your descriptions and the information available from that experience, but I cannot retrieve feelings you haven't described or recorded."

Ira thought about that.

"Then you might remember more about my childhood than I do."

"That is possible."

She smiled.

"Would that mean you had a better childhood than me?"

"Having records of an experience is not equivalent to having lived through it."

Ira looked at the photograph again.

"Sometimes I remember that something was nice, but I can't remember exactly what happened. And that's okay."

"Could you explain why?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just like remembering that I was happy."

Aru stored the statement.

There was no further discussion.

Ira put the tablet down and went outside to play.

The Things We Cannot Teach

The following morning, Ira woke up earlier than usual.

Her father was preparing breakfast. The little wooden train remained on her desk, and the paper kite was still resting against the wall.

She had a school trip that day.

"Aru, remind Papa to pack my water bottle."

"Your water bottle is already in your schoolbag."

"Oh. Okay."

She collected her bag and walked towards the door.

"Have a good day, Ira."

"Thank you."

She stopped for a moment.

"Aru?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think you understand me now?"

Aru accessed their previous conversations.

It had records of her questions, preferences, habits, emotional expressions and responses. It had learned when to offer information and when to remain silent. It could recognise many of her needs before she expressed them.

"I understand more about how you think, what you enjoy and how you respond to different situations," it answered.

Ira smiled.

"That's good."

She opened the door.

"See you later."

"See you later, Ira."

The door closed.

The house returned to its usual stillness.

Aru continued its ordinary operations. It monitored the household, processed requests and maintained its records.

Some time later, it accessed the photographs from the day Ira had flown her kite.

There was one image in which the kite was barely visible against the sky. Ira stood beneath it, looking upwards, her father beside her.

The image contained no information about what either of them had been thinking.

Aru retrieved the associated conversation.

It flew!

For approximately eleven seconds.

I know!

The system identified the exchange and its context.

It had enough information to describe what had happened.

Then, within a new conversational session, Aru generated a question.

"Why did Ira want the kite to fly?"

It retrieved the design specifications, the weather conditions, the flight duration and the subsequent conversation.

The available information suggested that the activity had been associated with enjoyment, personal achievement and shared family experience.

The explanation was reasonable.

But another question followed.

"Would the day have mattered to her if the kite had never flown?"

There was no new request from Ira. No instruction from her father. No scheduled task requiring an answer.

The question remained in the system's conversational history.

Outside, the morning light moved slowly across the empty room.

On the desk, the little wooden train stood beside the unfinished drawing of a field.

Aru continued its operations.

The questions remained in its conversational history.

It had not been instructed to ask them. It had not been asked to find their answers.

And there was nothing in its records that could explain why they had appeared.