

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:00:00):

You are listening to The Great Simplification. I'm Nate Hagens. On this show, we describe how energy, the economy, the environment, and human behavior all fit together and what it might mean for our future. By sharing insights from global thinkers, we hope to inform and inspire more humans to play emergent roles in the coming Great Simplification.

(00:00:29):

Today I'm joined by my friend Samantha Sweetwater, a leader and storyteller caring for people and the Earth at the intersection of spirituality, psychedelics, and systems change. Samantha is the founder and director of One Life Circle, a plant medicine ministry dedicated to truth, love, and the continuity of life. Her first book, *True Human: Reimagining Ourselves At The End of Our World*, will be available later in 2024. In this conversation, Samantha and I discussed what it means to be spiritual and more broadly what it means to be human while living in our turbulent, modern, metacrisis sort of world. It's my belief that any impactful change in a system will need to include the individual humans that comprise such a system, which is why Samantha's work is quite important. It's my hope that more individuals find ways to center and stabilize themselves the more that these type of people can act as stabilizers for the broader system. With that backdrop, please welcome Samantha Sweetwater.

(00:01:57):

Samantha Sweetwater, welcome to the program.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:02:00):

Thank you, Nate. It's good to be here.

Nate Hagens (00:02:04):

It's such a powerful name. I kind of wish that my parents had called me Jonathan Greenfield or something that is emotive and beautiful. Nope, it was Nathan Hagens. So you and I have met at a few conferences. We have some mutual friends and we had an instant synergy and awareness of each other's presence and work in these times. And you have told me that you are working on a book broadly about the metacrisis and what is sacred. Could you maybe introduce what your book is about and what you're working on to start us off?

The Great Simplification

Samantha Sweetwater (00:02:49):

Sure, happy to. So the book I'm working on right now is called True Human: Reimagining Ourselves At The End of Our World, and it braids together a conversation about the foundational ontological worldview factors that have created the metacrisis that we're in right now, that continue to replicate human misalignment with nature, human misalignment with other humans. It braids science, systems theory, and deep spiritual narrative and experience, also grounded in plant medicine work, into an exploration of who we might be and become in a world that works for life. One of the frames is at the end of our world is that the world that we were born into, that any of us were born into is a world that may, on its own terms, be coming to an end. That the underlying assumptions that are the architecture of how we see, think, what we assume to be right action, are shifting, could be coming to an end and a new beginning.

Nate Hagens (00:04:11):

A previous podcast guest pointed out that the end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:04:20):

Exactly. Exactly.

Nate Hagens (00:04:22):

So how do you link science and spirituality, which are not often linked?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:04:31):

It's interesting, in my intersectionality they are often linked. So it's an interesting... It speaks to my reality tunnel in a way, that question itself. I mean, one way that science and spirituality are deeply linked is in the inquiry into what is consciousness? What is reality? What is choice? You could say those are scientific questions. They're also the fundamental questions of all lineages of spirituality. The question, "What is reality?" Is not a very different question than, "What is God?" You could consider those to be actually two sides of the exact same question, one of which is framed secularly and one of which is framed spiritually or religiously. But they are essentially the same question.

(00:05:24):

The Great Simplification

What is the purposiveness of reality, of biology, of evolution? Is there purposiveness to it? What is the nature of agency? Do we have agency? Do organisms have agency? If there is agency, what does that mean in terms of the meaning, value, and purpose of any given thing or of any interaction between things? In a way, I was trained as a scientist at a very young age. I was in a gifted and talented program and trained very, very early in the scientific method. I was dissecting worms at five, and there's not a large difference between mysticism and science as approaches to reality. The difference is that mysticism takes subjective experience seriously, but real mysticism is extremely rigorous and actually seeks external over time data-driven verification of anything that is also internally experienced.

Nate Hagens (00:06:35):

What is mysticism?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:06:38):

It's a great question. I think mysticism is extremely misunderstood, that there are a lot of what I think of as kind of cultural shadows, cultural taboos, and also shame structures that have been wrapped around subjective experience, wrapped around spirituality, wrapped around mysticism. And there's good reason for that. There's rage at religious fundamentalism. Battles have been fought over various spiritual narratives that aren't verifiable relative to objective fact. There's legitimate reason to put our ability to subjectively verify things in the shadows, but at the same time, rigorous mysticism, I mean, one of the alchemical dictums is as above, so below, as below, so above. And you would then extend that to as within, so without, as without, so within.

(00:07:40):

And you could say real mysticism is an inquiry into the synthesis and constant dance between what is objectively verifiable, what is subjectively verifiable, and then also what is intersubjectively occurring. If I have a story that cats are cool and I love them and I'm attuned to them, I am more likely to actually be attuned to cats than someone who has a narrative that cats are dirty and not to be loved. There's always an intersubjective dance going on. And so part of what mysticism is is being in that inquiry over time in a way that takes in all those different lenses.

Nate Hagens (00:08:36):

The Great Simplification

So does mysticism, could you say it another way that you use wider boundaries of perception and analysis?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:08:45):

Yes, yes.

Nate Hagens (00:08:46):

Oh, then I'm mystic too, because I use wide boundaries in how I perceive situations.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:08:53):

Which that's a very cool meeting.

Nate Hagens (00:08:55):

I'm very attuned to cats as well.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:08:58):

And dogs.

Nate Hagens (00:08:58):

And dogs, yes. Animals maybe.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:09:03):

Yes. And I mean, you could say that attunement is one of the quadrants of skill that the mystic must have.

Nate Hagens (00:09:12):

Well, I know nothing about this, but a colleague, I don't know if you've ever heard of this guy, John Michael Greer, he's an arch druid, whatever order, and I used to make fun of him because he believed in magic and I was like, "Magic, that's ridiculous." But then he told me that you could frame your words in a certain way that could change what another person believed or thought and isn't that magic? And I thought, oh, that was kind of interesting. So we can do these things that can't just be parsed down into their material subcomponents. So I think part of this is language, and when you say things like subjective and intersubjective, those are not terms that I use every day. So it sounds fancier than it probably is, but your cat example, that I understood.

The Great Simplification

Samantha Sweetwater (00:10:15):

Got it.

Nate Hagens (00:10:16):

So briefly, what is subjective and what is intersubjective?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:10:19):

Simply, subjective is the boundary within the self. So you could say, "I'm having body affects about how I feel about being on this podcast with you." If I could give them name or not, I could say, are they pleasant or unpleasant? That's the most base touching into affect. I could say, oh, there's a little anxiety, there's a little excitement, there's a certain quick texture of calm, there's some curiosity. I'm sensing all of those things subjectively, internal to myself. You could also have subjective perceptions internal to yourself. Perceptions about what's going on for me, they would not be objective, they would be internal. Those would be your subjective perceptions about what's going on over here. Objectively, it's interesting. Playing with virtual worlds gets really interesting into what is objective.

(00:11:27):

You are looking at a screen, I am looking at a screen. We are both looking at an image, it's probably adding up as the same image for both of us from different sides of that screen. It's objectively true that you're seeing a vision of me that people will also see, many observers will see the same thing. Objectivity, this is a Forrest Landry way of describing this from the Immanent Metaphysics. Forrest is a really good friend and teacher of mine. The way he talks about objectivity, objectivity is based in the verifiability by many observers. That then gets really interesting when you realize that every observer is still a different angle of perception.

Nate Hagens (00:12:14):

So objectivity would be a majority rules of scientific measurement of a phenomenon?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:12:24):

Or measurement of any phenomena or verifiable by many observers.

Nate Hagens (00:12:31):

The Great Simplification

So how does the interrelationship between subjective and objective and then the relationship between my subjective, your subjective, and the intersubjective where the two of us are in a dialogue, how are those relevant to the metacrisis and what we face and people's perception and opinion and reactions of what's going on?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:12:58):

There's so many layers to that question. One could say that the assumption of objectivity is an imposition. We could say that to impose the assumption of objectivity about anything has a dimension of colonizing reality. We could say the same thing in reverse. We could say if subjectivity rules, then anybody can decide what's true based on their own personal experience. That also is a colonizing of shared reality. We could then hold that there is value in being able to objectively verify things and there is also value in subjective experience and that deep sense making that includes many people over time has to find new ways to include those things.

(00:14:01):

I did a little bit, I was doing research yesterday for my book with the Center for Greater Good, the Berkeley Center for Greater Good has since 2014 been gathering scientists who are looking at what are the things that cause societies and/or multiple groupings of nations to be peaceful over time. It turns out that one of the many things that is included in that list, both in terms of personal skills and in terms of cultural narrative is the recognition of the value of different perspectives and that the cultures that are contiguously peaceful have mechanisms of holding unity and diversity that are more highly developed than cultures that are consistently at war.

Nate Hagens (00:15:02):

Over modern or is this throughout history, this study?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:15:08):

Throughout history in modern contexts like the Swiss Canton is an example. The Iroquois Confederacy is an example that's historic. There are examples of Indigenous tribes in various places where there's currently, where there's long standing peace between multiple groups. Those studies don't link to the ecological conditions that generate that, which is also a thing. For example, in California, before it was California, there was long standing peace and one of the arguments for that anthropologically is it was so abundant that no one needed to fight over anything. But

The Great Simplification

the arguments in the current science look at all these different lines and levels of development, both of the individual and of the society as a whole and one of the major characteristics of that is this ability to hold multiplicity. You could also call it post-conventional moral development as a society. The ability to, there's many different dimensions of post-conventional moral development, but one of them is the ability to hold another's perspective.

Nate Hagens (00:16:24):

Is this related to Spiral Dynamics and/or metamodern perspective that you kind of suppress your own identity or objective belief and empathize and can listen to others?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:16:42):

Interestingly, the research does not point at all to that being a necessity. It's actually quite interesting. If you look at, I mean, metamodernism is one narrative that is Eurocentric, but there's instances that are in Indigenous contexts contemporaneous with our own where there's been a binding of multipolar traps consistently over time based in cultural mechanisms that wouldn't fit into the rubric of Spiral Dynamics or metamodernism.

Nate Hagens (00:17:22):

Is there a mapping between objective and subjective ways of thinking and masculine and feminine perspectives and ways of looking at the world?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:17:36):

Definitely. Though I'm hesitant to reify maps there, but I would say definitely.

Nate Hagens (00:17:50):

Well, here's why I ask, Samantha. You and I were at a conference last year. It was the first time I met you in person and I've been to several conferences in the last year and a half that is this way, roughly 50/50 men and women. But then after a couple days the demographics at the conference, the couple hundred people self-assemble into subgroups working on something, aspect of the metacrisis or whatever. Invariably, a lot of the women self-assemble and the men self-assemble and are working on different topics. I come from the peak oil movement where it had to be 90% men. I don't know why that is and still to this day in financial observation or climate change

The Great Simplification

less so, but energy depletion and collapse space, it's mostly men and not all, but the majority. Like this channel on YouTube is 80% of the followers of this channel are men, 20% of 80,000 or whatever is still a lot of women, but it's four out of five are men. What do you think's going on here? I know you well enough. I trust that you can opine on this.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:19:22):

I think that this is related to the subjective and objective deeply, and I would look at it as a bias towards parts to use Iain McGilchrist's words, more of a bias towards abstraction, recursion, specificity, mathematics, and parts awareness to more of a bias towards relationship that women tend... What often happens in my experience is there's a point at which the female bodied or the female oriented, the feminine oriented people in the room kind of realize that the thing that they really want or need to work on is the absence of relational intelligence or the need to cultivate relational intelligence. And when I say relational, I don't just mean between humans, I mean relational in terms of the qualities of interactions that we have with anything, with water, for example.

(00:20:29):

And that was actually something that happened at Emerge. There were ceremonies that happened in relationship to the water of Austin. We brought in Indigenous elders and there's a sense making that you could say is feminine that sees a connection, a deep connection between how we engage with and talk to and care for and pray with and weave drops from places all over the world of water as a prayer for continued water for all beings that is foundational to their being life. It is foundational to any world that we don't break life in, any world where humans continue that that's more of a feminine texture of sense-making and doing the act of building that relationship as a meaningful act that doesn't have a measurable outcome.

(00:21:26):

And that that might make sense to more of the women potentially in the room than to the men in the room, because the men might be more focused on, "Well, I don't know what that's doing. I can't measure it. I can't see the evidence of it. I can't give it a finite definition, so I'll go focus on the thing that I can do there." And that happens repeatedly over time. And then occasionally there's those things braid and some other, and I would use the word "magic" can happen sometimes because very skillful means

The Great Simplification

can come together with great beauty. When those things come together, they can empower each other, but they often also frustrate each other.

Nate Hagens (00:22:17):

Well, is this like, I never read the book, but Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus. Is this along those lines?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:22:26):

Certainly it's along those lines. I think it's useful to think of it. There's many different ways you can think of it. Yes, you could think of it as Venus, Mars, you could think of it as right brain, left brain. You could think of it as mental versus embodied. You could think of it, you could even divide it as secular versus sacred. And I find that division actually quite interesting, especially when you add it up with all those other views that then you're starting to get a fuller picture of the different textures of where we could be more integrated if we chose to be potentially. And where we sort of default divide. Certainly the Venus, Mars narrative is useful and it is well proven that women attend to different things than men do and that there's strengths in that and that there's some deep challenges in it.

Nate Hagens (00:23:36):

Well, it's not just masculine, feminine divide. There's all sorts of divides in the cultural conversations around the metacrisis. And maybe I was naive, I don't think it was just me, but I think there's this unspoken assumption that if we have enough of the facts and we get enough pro-social people at the table, that everyone will see the situation roughly the same and work towards if not solutions, viable responses and everyone will be part of the conversation and it ends up not being that way. There are just fractal conversations because of different temperaments, different value systems, different understandings, and it's frustrating and I know that masculine, feminine is one of them. There's also the economic, ecological. A lot of people don't really think about ecosystems and life as sacred. They're focused on the economy and what that means for poverty and things like that. I mean, you seem to me of the people that I've met that you have a little bit of a foot in all of these different demographics. What do you think about all this?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:25:02):

The Great Simplification

The neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett says every human being is a unique ontology. I think that's just such a potent place to begin. That in a very real way, each one of us has constructed reality uniquely from the internal subjective sense of having a construction about what is true, having a construction about what people are, what nature is, what the future is, what love is, what is worth doing, worth attending to. In a way, I think that's where we have to start. And the approach I have taken to group process over the years is then the other side of that is that any given space has to start with some assumptions that orient towards, "Can we agree on very simple things?" And in my work, I always put life at the center of that set of agreements.

(00:26:13):

That's part of what the book is about is this one little shift is the way I frame it. That of putting life at the center and orienting towards the care for and continuity or the beauty, abundance, and continued biodiversity of the process of life. And I talk about it as a song which is an invitation to attune and care for and be aesthetically attuned to what is at stake, what is actually calling us forward for the future of the children and the future of the trees and the future of the watersheds. That mirrors what in Indigenous narratives are called original instructions.

(00:27:00):

There's also many ways that those principles are named in different Indigenous traditions, and I think you've interviewed Tyson and I know you've interviewed a couple of Indigenous women, but one framing is that there are original instructions to human organisms, to the human beings who sit in a particular place in the ecology of things. And those instructions are to tend the beauty, abundance, and continuity of life in the elders from The Heart of the World who are from the Kogi and Arhuaco and two other tribes. They finish every process by saying, "Let us continue to continue." So the orientation is always larger than the self. It's always towards the continuity of generations and it is not just the human generations. It's oriented towards the deep knowing that the continuity of human generations inter-dependes with and is made meaningful by the continuity of all beings.

Nate Hagens (00:28:05):

Except the original instructions on how to live did not foresee a planet with eight billion of that species.

The Great Simplification

Samantha Sweetwater (00:28:17):

No, they did not. They did not foresee peak oil. They did not foresee eight billion. They did not foresee AI. They did not foresee a technosphere and an economy that is root level out of alignment with the continuity of life. But doing that thought experiment of is there a way to reverse engineer or lift original instructions, the concept of original instructions, which essentially is human alignment with the biosphere, which then by extension is alignment of our economy and our technology and our governance.

Nate Hagens (00:29:01):

Were our original instructions really human alignment with the biosphere or was it just human alignment with our local ecosystem and we were never big enough to have any impact on the biosphere?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:29:16):

It is actually quite hard to know historically what was true. When you start to dig into the actual numbers of how many Indigenous people were here on this continent, the numbers stretch from hundreds of thousands to 26 million. These are very, very different things to look at in terms of ecological impacts. There's a strong argument to make, and I find this to be a really interesting hypothesis. The fossil record shows us that everywhere that humans emigrated out of Africa, there followed a major extinction of the megafauna of that place. That is a predictable pattern in the fossil record.

(00:29:59):

It is not 100% proven. I've just done a fair bit of research into this, but one hypothesis that is probable, it's currently the most probable one is that wherever we went that we hadn't co-evolved with the ecology, we just went and created an environmental catastrophe. And you can hypothesize from that that original instructions were the first response culturally, if we look at this in terms of Marvin Harris' cultural materialism, that they were a super structure response to human hubris relative to the environment designed to create continuity at that level of technological scale. Which then invites us to ask the question, what stories can guide, bind, and direct our next stage of civilizational development?

Nate Hagens (00:30:57):

The Great Simplification

Do I have those original instructions somewhere within my body or my brain?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:31:05):

Not in some magical sense, no, but in the sense of, there's a number of ways I like to think about this. One is if you're here, and this was a teaching from Chief Chevez from the Lenca tribe who's a tribe from Honduras who has living oral memory of when they moved during the Ice Age and living oral memory of making it through the conquistadors and slavery and all these layers of colonization and genocide-

Nate Hagens (00:31:37):

You mean passed down and passed down and passed down?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:31:40):

In oral lineage. And the moment I met this man, he's such an exquisite man and he works in ex-risk now, by the way, the first thing he said to a group of almost mostly white people was, "If you're here, you are carrying the same memories as I am. It's just that my people remember them." So in that sense, yes, in that sense, yes. But in the sense that I think of original instructions not as an externally imposed set of principles, but as an always co-emergent co-regulation with ecology and culture that orients towards continuity. So original instructions from a western integral perspective, we could cultivate them externally, objectively, scientifically. Let's look at all the qualities of interaction that nourish, regenerate, detoxify, protect, perpetuate vital ecological flourishing for humans and all beings. We can look at that on the external, the Its quadrant in Ken Wilber's map.

(00:33:15):

And then in the I, We, in the personal subjective and the collective subjective, we can look at what kind of embodiment and embodiment practices supports us to be attuned to the well-being of ourselves, other people, and the environment? What kind of collective practices are needed to nurture a deep sense of that being fundamentally important? Harvest ceremonies, for example, if you look at pagan traditions, they were oriented culturally towards that continuity. Whether you believe that it matters or not, that you pray for the harvest, like actually taking time as a culture to care for it and market and give gratitude for it is it binds us in on an embodied level to a sense of being connected to the continuity of life.

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:34:19):

And yet we have Super Bowl and Halloween and big fireworks on 4th of July. But there are people that pay attention to the solstices and the harvest moon and things like that. So what does this all imply for the metacrisis? Are you suggesting that people, could there be a movement where people become more aware of this and collectively grow that movement or is it we need to heal from the ground up and any top-down stuff doesn't have a chance at working until we get enough humans that are working in these multiple perspectives and more healed?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:35:13):

I would say and, and. Absolutely, definitely, and, and. I think there will be many movements that emerge in the next arc of time, providing we don't have a massive, massive catastrophic event that inhibits communication and connection, that there will be multiple movements that will not be mimetically the same, but they will be mimetically related. In other words, there may be a movement of women's empowerment that's connected to environment. There may be a movement... The work that I'm doing is oriented towards what I call enlifenment, which is a next stitch on enlightenment, which is oriented towards transcendence to actually ground that transcendence kind of Ouroboros style or infinity loop style back into, "Well, what do you do with this consciousness once you have it?" You use it, you work with it to be fluid and available to tend life, to put life at the center of the process. I see a movement arising around that.

(00:36:28):

And I would say I see many sub movements happening. The work that Thomas Hubl is doing around healing collective trauma would be a good example that is impacting many, many individuals, many communities and finding ways to adapt the work locally in different contexts that are not always local different contexts. They may be different racially, they may be different, you mentioned class, and then they also may be different locally relative to what's going on in a given place. But that's quite a growing movement that is having powerful impacts, that work with what the individual needs to do and also work with the community level. The Bioregional regeneration movement is an increasingly large movement that has both urban and rural dimensions to it and an aspect of best practice and scalability and an aspect of locality and the

The Great Simplification

uniqueness of a given place in a given group of people. So I think of it ecologically, you could say, that there will be an ecology of processes at different scales.

Nate Hagens (00:37:50):

Do you know Nora Bateson?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:37:52):

I do, yeah. I don't know her well, but we have a lot in common in terms of the way we think.

Nate Hagens (00:37:59):

Yeah, you do have a lot in common. I talked to Nora last week, she's a good friend of mine, and I told her, and I know her well enough that I knew she wouldn't take offense to this, that when she talks, it seems circular at times and I don't know what she's saying, and yet my body feels that what she's saying is important. And I kind of get that same feeling with you. I'm not understanding everything that you're saying, but my body feels like, okay, she said something there that was important. So maybe that's just my masculine knucklehead-ness or something, but there's a little ember that is being awoken by your word combinations. I don't know.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:38:48):

I would guess that that is the case. And it may be partly that I certainly, I speak in a fairly not entirely right brain way, but I certainly ground what I am speaking to in a right brain quadrant. It's more poetic, it's more aesthetic, it's more embodied, it's more relational. And so that may be a fease of the sense of I don't understand all of it because I'm not speaking dominant left brain language.

Nate Hagens (00:39:23):

That was a question. I don't know if you listened to my podcast with Iain McGilchrist, but it was on my list to ask him, is the left brain, right brain schism that is happening in our world. Is there a gender aspect to that? And I never got to ask him.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:39:42):

I don't think there has to be. I think if we don't want that kind of schism, then we make sure everyone does art and/or music and/or physical practice. There's educational

The Great Simplification

dimensions to nurturing that wholeness that you see from very young with kids like boys are got their trucks and they're building things and destroying them, and girls are making pretty things. And that's not always true with all humans in different kinds of bodies, but there are definitely tendencies there, and yet aesthetic education is something we can all respond to.

Nate Hagens (00:40:25):

So I have a similar situation with Iain as I do with you. I've got 17 questions here and I've only gotten through two so far. So one thing I wanted to ask you is in our previous conversations offline, we've talked about spirituality and that's something that is central to your work. Maybe you could tell us a bit about your own spiritual journey and what is the word spiritual, what does being spiritual mean to you?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:41:01):

I was born during the Cold War era. I was born into a little family and community that was very ecologically conscious. And I cannot remember a time that I wasn't aware of the metacrisis, you could say. Certainly I didn't have that language for it, but I don't remember a time when I wasn't aware that human beings, humanity could extinct itself and all complex life on this planet during my lifetime. And then that was textured by art and science. I was very into both of those things as a kid. And my perception of how spirituality developed for me was at this intersection of having an extremely voracious mind asking tons of questions and getting to more unanswerables than answerables very quickly as a young person.

(00:42:05):

And I think those unanswerables drove me to explore in a different quadrant that you could say was the mystery and was, well, if I can't answer it, maybe I can feel it. Or if I can't answer it, maybe I can make a dance about it. And to me, spirituality tends to live more in the quadrant of let me feel my place in the universe, and then it becomes mysticism when you also ask, let me add in the scientific dimension. That's how I think. That's a very quirky definition of mysticism. It is not the conventional one, but when you put those two things together-

Nate Hagens (00:42:52):

So spiritualism plus science equals mysticism? Or spirituality?

The Great Simplification

Samantha Sweetwater (00:42:56):

Not exactly. But rigorous attention to both the subjective and the objective over time, including what you can repeatedly verify within yourself and what you can repeatedly verify out in the world and others could repeatedly verify as well, adds up to mysticism.

Nate Hagens (00:43:24):

So part of that is awareness and maturity almost, because some people are just looking externally at what's going on and other people have a little Nate or a little Samantha on their shoulders observing Samantha's reactions to what's going on. And when you get older, you talk to little Samantha or little Nate and have conversations and is that what you mean about merging the objective and the subjective in a way?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:44:00):

No. Self-witness is awareness aware of awareness. You could also be aware of different parts of yourself. All of that is happening internally to you so it's all in the subjective dimension. But it's interesting, so self-witness can have many different qualities. Could be kind of a base level of self-witness like, oh, you didn't make your bed this morning. That's you witnessing yourself. It could be much more kind of non-dual and objective. An example, like a more mature example would be watching oneself in a cycle of unwinding a trigger or responding to someone else's trigger and noticing that you're doing that in a calm way that honors you and honors them. That would be a higher level of self-witness. And then meditation is not witnessing any of those things. Meditation is witnessing awareness itself, is that witness observes awareness.

Nate Hagens (00:45:20):

What is all this called?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:45:24):

This is definitely a spiritual conversation. This is all in the quadrant of spirituality. I find it very difficult to answer the question, what is spirituality? For a variety of reasons, including that I like to respect everybody's unique answer to that question. So I could share my answer, but I love that many people have different definitions of it, but all of this is in the quadrant you could say, of consciousness, self-study, spirituality, and also personal and emotional development.

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:45:59):

Well, you and I have been blessed to have traveled around the world and observed other cultures and other people, and I think, I don't mean this in a pejorative sense, just an observational sense that in the United States where we both live, I would say people are pretty disconnected from any sort of spiritual practice and awareness of what you just described. When and how do you think this became so common? And is it related to our isolation from other people and the land which also relates to the carbon pulse and all of our fossil armies that are helping us with all the goodies being delivered to our houses, and we don't have to have that connection, what are your thoughts on all that?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:46:57):

There's been a historical progression in the United States. There was a poll done this year in September. I think it's a Pew poll, I will have to look it up again, that the percentage of religious people has gone down to approximately 44%. And the percentage of people who identify as spiritual has gone up to 33% in America. America is a country that has been largely defined by Judeo-Christianity, which orients towards a divinity outside of the world, not a divinity in the world. And what's interesting about a person identifying as spiritual is there's often a sense of inner divinity. It could even just be inner awareness, but there's an awareness of awareness. And when you actually touch awareness of awareness, you realize that it's sort of special.

(00:48:07):

So we're in an interesting moment culturally, historically, in terms of kind of a vast foment in where we ground in psychospiritual, psychoemotional relatedness. You could say that that entire Judeo-Christian history, the entire history of axial gods of the Abrahamic religions is part of a foundational cause of the metacrisis. That there was a rupture of divinity in the world that historically was happened, not all in the same place at the same time, but once you've taken God out of the world, you can do whatever you want to the world.

Nate Hagens (00:48:57):

So I have a couple coaches right now, and one of them is talking about four quadrants, the emotional, the physical, the spiritual, and the mental. Of course, I

The Great Simplification

spend a lot of my time in the mental quadrant and I say, "I don't have much of a spiritual presence." And she's like, "Yes, you do." I'm like, "No, I really don't." She's like, "You're with your ducks. You go and meditate in nature. You go and hug trees, you work in the soil. Your affiliation with nature is your spirituality." I'm like, "Well, yeah, there's that." So how connected do you think spirituality is humans being in connection with nature? And is this the fall from grace that you just suggested has led to the metacrisis?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:49:51):

Simple answer, yes.

Nate Hagens (00:49:55):

Okay.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:49:57):

More complex answer, as long as there's a separation between spirit and matter, between the sacred and the world, and I think that between the sacred and profane is a different conversation, but as long as we are incapable of recognizing that the world is beautiful and valuing the love and awe and wonder and the smells and the tastes and the textures and the beauty and the miracle of it, as long as we are incapable of feeling that, we will never solve the metacrisis.

Nate Hagens (00:50:40):

I agree with that.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:50:42):

I don't think you need to call it spirituality though. I'm hesitant to answer your question by... One of the things I find interesting is that you have all of that without identifying as spiritual, and that's okay. That's also beautiful.

Nate Hagens (00:51:03):

Yeah, it's just a word. I'm more curious about your role and your perspective and what's really at the core of it than the actual word of spirituality. Because a lot of people, when they hear the word spirituality, they think, oh, he goes to church and he believes in this, that, or the other. To me, spirituality just means there's something

The Great Simplification

larger than yourself that you find profound and important and gives meaning to your life.

Samantha Sweetwater (00:51:33):

Yes. Yeah, to me, spirituality means that I meet the world, life, my own experience as miracle, as miraculous.

Nate Hagens (00:51:43):

Here's a difficult question, you just suggested that unless we recognize the earth and the species and the ecosystems and that we truly love and value the beauty that exists, there's no hope of solving the metacrisis. I agree with that, except the scout team of empathic people that deeply care about the wounds that the Earth is undergoing now and the demise of other species that share this planet with us. Those people are more emotionally and therefore physically in other ways fragile relative to the people that are in the consensus technology trance of the technological, technosphere, Superorganism of consumption, however you want to call it. So those exact people that could be champions on behalf of earth's future are also at the front lines and taking arrows at least emotionally. I find that. What do you think?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:52:58):

Absolutely, absolutely. I think in one aspect of being spiritual that's very strongly in the Tibetan Buddhist trance tradition is, that is the warriorship that comes with that, like to choose the warriorship that comes with the open heart, which is not easy work at all. And it certainly requires a sublimation of emotion to be able to show up with extreme clarity and strategic efficacy and coherent analysis of the nature of power as it is on the planet right now. It requires a great deal of sobriety and stamina and integration in all the ways we've been talking about of the masculine and feminine, of the emotional and the intellectual. And the game theoretics of it don't look good. The game theoretics look terrible. It is far easier to be a sociopath and keep going and feel nothing than it is to be an empath or simply a feeling being and persist.

(00:54:28):

I struggle with that, to be frank. And there's truisms that are interesting to sit with, like Martin Luther King Jr. speaking to the moral arc of the universe bending towards justice. But still, I feel, if I'm rigorously honest, that too is just a story. And if I look at statistical dynamics and game theoretics, it does not look good. And yet, life does not

The Great Simplification

like to lose life. Life really likes to keep going. And it turns out that at the end of the day, we are biological organisms whose lives are at stake. And I get very curious, and I think of where we are right now as a crucible that is a crucible for our own evolution. And you could say it's a crucible for the evolution of consciousness, but it's also a crucible for the evolution of systems because either the system breaks itself and fails to survive and we break ourselves and we fail to thrive.

(00:55:49):

Or we find this, I think of it as a bio-spiritual urge to nurture the continuity of life. And one of the inquiries I've been exploring is could it be that we're right at that point in punctuated equilibrium where there may be sufficient chaos to actually create the lifting gift, to create the jump to the next order of coherence of the system. We won't know, but we could do the work of being that which attracts the right solution, things out of solution. That's part of the work of being the storyteller, being the healer, being the systems creator to create towards the better possibility, the better story in a way that nurtures the continuity of life.

Nate Hagens (00:56:54):

I've long said, I don't know that you've heard me say this, but we've arrived at a species level conversation where we're the first generation of our species to be able to understand where we came from, how we got here, what we need, what we're doing, what sort of technologies we have, what future pathways are available to us. And sometimes I think that we almost had to navigate the carbon pulse and dig up this ancient carbon bonanza and do what we're doing to wake up and see what our role is on this planet. So in a recent email exchange, you and I had brought up the question, what are humans for? And I will ask you that on camera. What are humans for, Samantha?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:57:44):

Well, I think-

Nate Hagens (00:57:46):

Are they for anything?

Samantha Sweetwater (00:57:51):

The Great Simplification

I look at evolution itself and ecology as purposive. I look at this question from an ecological frame that I also think of as a spiritual frame, but I think of it first as an ecological frame that no organism lacks purpose relative to the ecology it occupies. All organisms have purpose relative to the ecology they occupy. That's a basic truth of ecology. And the nature of evolutionary processes is that everything co-evolves with everything else. And when something gets too far out of alignment, it goes extinct. Or you have the lemmings jumping off the cliffs, et cetera, et cetera. And from that perspective, we are a very unique class of organisms.

(00:58:48):

We're a class of organisms that has trumped trophic cascades. So trophic cascades are defined by predation generally, and the organism at the top of the trophic cascade, generally speaking, plays a harmonizing role within the ecology relative to the flows of all the other relationships in that ecology. So starting from that insight is a useful place to ask what are humans for? If we have trumped trophic cascades, what then are we for? And looking at that question, there's one angle that says, well, on some level we are then responsible for managing trophic cascades, but there's more. And that more is where we are right now in our collective story. Could it be... You could say, our purpose is to create technology and transcend the Earth, which probably won't go very well. But relative to the biosphere, relative to the intelligence of Gaia, we can name things, we can create things, we can design things, we can engineer things, we can observe things, we can analyze things.

(01:00:07):

So relative to the ecology, if we really focus on that question, we can ask, well, what could we do with all these competencies that causes the perpetuation and continued flourishing and evolution of the biosphere as a whole? It goes back to exactly what you just said. We're the first generation that has actually had a planet-wide conversation about what to do with us relative to the biosphere. And the keys lie in that focal point. And I believe very strongly by the way that this is a question that must be asked from all the angles. It must be asked from the angle of how we manage energy. It must be asked from the angle of how we raise our children. It must be asked from the angle of what is most fundamental about being human?

Nate Hagens (01:01:04):

The Great Simplification

What do you hope is going to happen? And what would you like to see the impact of your book coming out in 2024 be? What are some of the possible benign pathways ahead of us?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:01:27):

I would like to see a planetary conversation about us being for the celebration, evolution, beauty, abundance, biodiversity of life. I would like to see a global conversation about that asked from every angle. I would like to see us take very seriously the ways in which even most humane AI models, for example, put humans above biosphere. I don't think that will ever work. I would like to see the conversation orient humans towards reconfigure... What we're talking about here is the continuity of the biosphere relative to humans and technology nurturing both of those things. I would like to see that reordered in a very non-arbitrary way that simply gets the depth of misalignment. And I don't need to repeat all the conversations you've already had about that, but people could just listen to the podcast with Daniel on AI and it's all there.

(01:02:29):

And I would love to see a synthesis between what we think we are biologically and what we know we are spiritually as this exquisite species. I talk about us as creators, preservers, destroyers like the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, the creator, the preserver, the destroyer. And what we've gotten wrong about that is the majority of what we see as creative is currently destructive relative to the biological substrate that we depend upon. But if we oriented towards creativity that is actually generative for the biosphere and got nuanced in cycles of death and decay and destruction, I mean, that's a very deep exploration of what could circularity really be.

Nate Hagens (01:03:27):

Could you give a couple examples of how we could be more creative in a regenerative way?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:03:34):

Certainly. I mean, there's silly examples. I work on a project in the packaging supply chain working on generating a circular packaging economy. But in nature, there's "all waste is resource." So how do we create materials that then become waste that is resource for the biosphere, and how do we work with existing materials that fit into

The Great Simplification

that category already, like cardboard in a way that is circular with our agricultural soils, for example. Those are kind of material examples. Human shit, excuse my French, but our poop could be an incredible resource. We could actually, one strand of designing medicine better would be to design for more circular loops that are biophilically coherent at every level of scale. And that may actually be a good reverse engineering of what is healthy for us to take pharmacologically. I mean, I think it's interesting to ask these questions in both directions.

(01:04:41):

I've done a lot of work in the food system, and a question that I don't think anyone has really asked is if we actually nourished all the human bodies on the planet in an optimal way, we might be able to reverse engineer a food system that has less meat in it, but still has meat in it, that orients towards diets that also orient towards our genetics in a way that is an ecological global food system. I think we have to ask questions from different angles, and I tend to hold a question, a constant question like, might it already be more harmonious than we think in ways that we're not thinking through from different directions, because thinking in linear chains all the time. But might there actually be harmonies that are seeking to arise?

(01:05:40):

And then there's some obvious things around reuse and reduce and that you talk about a lot of things like darning socks and taking care of the garden, and those things absolutely apply to a more ecological civilization. That's what I'd like to see. I would also like to see all children welcomed at birth and parents and children better resourced. I think that is actually one of the root causes of our continuous challenges. Some of the various episodes you've done on different deterministic understandings of our development are very relevant to that thing that I'd like to see, parents and children resourced.

Nate Hagens (01:06:35):

I would like to ask you some personal questions. I assume you watch my podcast, so you know what I'm about to ask you. This conversation we should treat as just the beginning, because there's so many questions I didn't have to get to and my mind is spinning with some of the things that you've said. You're quite articulate, but this is a realm that I don't, I'm not an expert in this, so thank you. What advice do you have for

The Great Simplification

the average listener who may not have been living with the metacrisis knowledge his or her life like you have, but has become aware of how all these things fit together?

(01:07:26):

And as you were just speaking, I agree with what you're suggesting, but what you're really saying is we have to change our value systems as individuals and then ask better questions that influence our technology and our industry and our governance. But all this biomimicry and learning from nature and different things will require a smaller scale of, if not the global, certainly the United States material throughput. So if that's true, we have to navigate from here to there, which is the thing that's like the root canal appointment on your calendar that emotionally takes up your brain. I'm rambling with this question, Samantha, but what advice do you have to the people that think the way that you do and agree with what you've said?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:08:29):

Simply, make relationships very important. And when I say that, I mean your relationship to yourself, to your own body, to your own mind, your relationship to your closest ones, your family, your relationships to different communities and community is a very broad top thing. Communities of affinity, communities of place. And then your relationship to nature in various dimensions. So one of the principles of Indigenous consciousness is that is place consciousness. And you spoke to earlier, there's been a rupture of our relationship with place, but restoring relationship with place and animals, organisms, the tree outside your window, the soil in your backyard, whether you know how to plant a seed, that's a relationship.

(01:09:30):

Thinking of all of these things as relationships, the relationship between where you get your food from and your own body, the relationship between where your food comes from and the farm workers. Attending to relationship is the primary competency of the next stage of civilization. And then also you can start to feel whether those relationships are, whether they make sense in terms of being expressions of your own values. And I think that that is one of the ways that when I watch people transition from more of a default job that is part of the extraction machine to something more meaningful, more contributory, it always comes through care for relationships.

Nate Hagens (01:10:23):

The Great Simplification

That all made complete sense to me. But when we hang up, I'm going to think I need to tend to my relationships. What would that mean physically for a masculine person like me this week? Pay attention to the salience and be fully present in my conversation with other people or with nature or with the animals in my life, or what would be the tangible advice to improve and tend to my relationships?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:11:03):

Such a good question. Just asking people how they are, emphasizing eye contact. These studies on peaceful societies was very inspiring to me. The distinctions in relationship are so tiny. The increase or decrease of the amount of peace in a society is based on algorithmically, on how many reciprocal relationships occur between people in that society. And that's going to be unique with anyone you cross paths with. It might be the person at the store who's always kind of checked out, who you just habitually check out with because they're checked out or because you're on your phone or where you're like, "I'm taking this thing off. I'm taking my earbuds off. I'm just going to say hi, I don't need anything from this person."

(01:11:54):

I'm just going to say, relax in my body, which is an act of co-regulation and say hello. With your girlfriend, it could be making sure you say, I love you, or taking her out to dinner in a way you didn't before, making something a little more special than it was before or a little more intentional. We haven't reviewed our shared values lately. Let's do that because we're here, we're choosing this together. And I want you to know that that's meaningful to me. Just stating that something is meaningful. You don't always have to fill in the blank with the meaning, increases the sense of meaning. With the food you're eating, I listened to your Frankly on your coach and the quadrants of self-care were brilliant. It's a brilliant map. Even looking at how you're sourcing your water or your grapes or the meat that you eat. And those are relational inquiries as well.

Nate Hagens (01:12:58):

So really, I could paraphrase it by you're recommending that we be more active in our relationships as opposed to passive and just on a autopilot?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:13:13):

Yes.

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (01:13:16):

I mean, that dovetails with my biggest recommendation to people is social capital. Building social capital ahead of the Great Simplification is the biggest no regret strategy that we have.

Samantha Sweetwater (01:13:28):

Absolutely.

Nate Hagens (01:13:29):

Because lost, I mean, I haven't used the words that you have just now so eloquently, but we've lost this relational way of being in our lives. And I think it's because of, not only because of, but in large part because of this massive amount of physical material surplus on the backs of hydrocarbons.

Samantha Sweetwater (01:14:01):

Yes, I think you're right about that.

Nate Hagens (01:14:02):

Yeah.

Samantha Sweetwater (01:14:02):

Combined with the digital architectures that define our attention.

Nate Hagens (01:14:09):

So in addition to mostly male listeners to this show, there are mostly older people, but there are some in their teens and twenties listening to this program. How would you change your advice to young humans who become aware of our ecological, lack of relational culture that we find ourselves in?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:14:36):

Yeah, I would say three things. Use your body. Be sure that you are doing things with your body, doing sports, dance, art, lovemaking. Use your hands. It will make you smarter. It will also make you more resilient relative to wherever this ship of civilization is going. And what I see a lot with young people is that there's a fork of either hope or hopelessness, and it only makes sense to choose the fork of hope. It does not make

The Great Simplification

sense at this time in our existence to throw the towel in and take the nihilistic path. It only makes sense. And the reason why is because it's meaningful and meaning is a basic human need. And that then it's like, "Well, what are your creative gifts? What are the things you care about? What are the things that keep you up at night?"

(01:15:35):

These are basic purpose questions. Ask yourself these questions and follow those threads. We're certainly barring massive catastrophic events, we're certainly heading into a massive retooling of the job market. And younger people are the best equipped to be available to fill in all the needs. Like I like saying, just assume there's going to be a regenerative movement at civilizational scale. And get curious about what part of that song you would like to tend, what relationships you would like to tend. The horizon for an emergent civilization, if there is one is relationship. It's relationship at every order of scale.

Nate Hagens (01:16:20):

You have, as you said, a science background, but now merging into other perspectives and spirituality, etc. I think I've started asking this question at the end of these interviews. There's over 200 million college students now, and there's a lot of postdocs and graduate students who are working on papers or theses or projects, but I think they're kind of embedded in this techno, superorganism sort of framing of the world. Do you have any categories of suggestions that people like postdocs should be asking that are really important questions that we need more people working on?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:17:10):

There's a couple that are really poignantly alive. One is, how is biology, ecology, bodies different than machines? So it's increasingly dominant that people will say, very smart people, tech-oriented people will say the human body is a machine. An organism is a machine. An organism is not a machine. An organism is an organism. And the distinctions between those things are an area where we should put a great deal of attention right now, not on collapsing organisms into the category of machine because we understand machine because we're hacking things at a very, very minute, mathematical and computational level. That's bad thinking because it's an incorrect metaphor that imposes a reductionist view on biology. We should reverse that in all dimensions and get very curious about how biology and ecology are distinct and

The Great Simplification

emergent categories from physics. It is incorrect to collapse all of that into physics and that they are not the same thing as machines.

(01:18:27):

And to understand that as those distinctions is where our possible flourishing lies. So if someone is in computational work or working in AI, one of the questions I like to see people ask is, how does biology structure, how does ecology structure goals? So AI works according to goal logic. Any goal taken to its umpteenth... a single goal, taken to its furthest conclusion, we end up with a paper clip maximizer kind of problem. But ecology does function in terms of this incredibly variegated time-bound, place-bound, context-rich set of goals and contingencies and boundary conditions. And to put our most tender and rigorous attention on that at this time is what I think people should be attending to.

(01:19:30):

And then people who are more in policy and in the direction of working with human systems should be working on circularity, closing loops, increasing new materials, innovations. We need to solve composting at scale. If we are going to actually innovate a materials economy, we have to solve composting. We have to solve recycling as well, but composting is put forward as a solution, and it's actually much more ecologically toxic than plastics right now because we don't have composting.

(01:20:10):

We have to look at all these circular loops many different ways, and we have to tell the stories that are compelling about them. We have to shift the Overton window around what we can and can't talk about. I'd love to see, and I think we're getting close to being able to shift the Overton window towards does this create more biodiversity? Does this create sustaining soils? Those are places where we're getting close to there being a collective awareness. And carbon is too small of a conversation, but it's always a metric that people understand. So those are things that I think people should work on.

Nate Hagens (01:20:58):

If you could wave a magic wand and there was no recourse to you personally, what is one thing you would do to improve human and planetary futures?

Samantha Sweetwater (01:21:09):

The Great Simplification

I would awaken awe in every single human for a few moments. Absolute awe in the allness, not in the oneness, in the allness. Awe in the uniqueness of the moss and the water droplet and the spider web and the textures of the wind. Awe in the everything and the all things. Not in the one thing, in the everything and the all things.

Nate Hagens (01:21:39):

Thank you for that. I actually do experience awe on a weekly basis. It's almost always from finding some really cool and unexpected thing on my wildlife camera, or a sunrise or a sunset or something happening in the field with the animals or something, and I just pause and it's just like, how freaking amazing was that? Samantha Sweetwater to be continued, my friend. Thank you.

Samantha Sweetwater (01:22:07):

Thank you, Nate. It's so good to be here.

Nate Hagens (01:22:10):

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