

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

You're listening to The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens. That's me. On this show, we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment and our society. Together with scientists, experts and leaders, this show is about understanding the bird's eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals.

Nate Hagens (00:00:33):

Tim Watkins is a social scientist with a public policy background, and he's an advocate for mental health awareness. Tim has written several books on topics ranging from how energy connects with money to managing depression, to explaining the predicament that Western culture faces. Tim has his own blog, The Consciousness of Sheep, where I found him, where he discusses energy, the environment, the economy and society, and how each of these play a role in shaping our future. Tim has a brilliant mind with great insights in how energy impacts what the economy can and can't do and, by extension, what options are available to us in the future.

Nate Hagens (00:01:18):

Today, we mostly took the energy, money, economy risks as assumed and focused on the importance of maintaining mental health during the coming unsettled times. I enjoyed speaking with Tim, and I hope you'll learn something from our conversation.

Nate Hagens (00:01:47):

Hello, Tim.

Tim Watkins (00:01:48):

Hi, Nate.

Nate Hagens (00:01:49):

Good to see you, sir. How are things in the South of Wales today?

Tim Watkins (00:01:55):

Overcast and still cold, I think adding to our woes.

Nate Hagens (00:02:01):

Well, it's spring then. It's spring.

Tim Watkins (00:02:04):

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The last time I spoke to you, the temperatures were up over 20 degrees and it looked like spring was about to break, and I think, within days, the temperature went down to minus three at night. Of course, it's just at that time where all of the seedlings are starting to come up, so you have a frost that ruins the crops.

Nate Hagens (00:02:22):

Do you have a garden? Do you plant?

Tim Watkins (00:02:25):

I've got a couple of trees. That's all I do.

Nate Hagens (00:02:28):

We have a big garden here. To be honest, this is the longest winter I can recall. Tim, I don't know you really well. We've just recently introduced ourselves to each other, but I feel like I know you because your blog, based on a book you wrote, *Consciousness of Sheep*, every time I read it, I'm like, "Damn, this guy, I could have written that." It's like we've arrived at the same place on seeing how energy, economy, money, the environment, the political situation, the broader human predicament fit together.

Nate Hagens (00:03:09):

You also are a mental health expert and, for much of your career, you worked in that field and you wrote many books on depression, mental health. I'd really like to get into that on this conversation, but let's first start from the top. Could you just give us a bird's-eye view of how you see all these things fitting together and how you arrived at this conclusion?

Tim Watkins (00:03:37):

One of the phrases I use a lot on my blog is this idea of clever people somewhere else dealing with everything because it's the way we live. Basically, I got very ill maybe 12 years ago where it involved a back-and-forth-to-hospital sort of stuff. Finally, it got stabilized. That caused me to lose the job that I was doing back when I was campaigning on mental health, and I got interested in what had happened with the 2008 crash and what that had done to the economy. The assumption was clever people must know how this works. Of course, the more you look into it, the more you realize that, hang on, there aren't any clever people somewhere else that deal with this stuff.

Tim Watkins (00:04:19):

Following the money back, you then get into the energy side of things, the resource depletion, and you had this realization. It's like the Wile E. Coyote character that we've run off this cliff and nobody at this point yet has looked down. We're keeping this going with fictional quantitative easing, the ever lower interest rates. What it's all trying to cover up is that we lack any surplus energy anymore, that we built this huge complex, global system which requires ever more energy with each passing moment to keep it

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going. The energy's run out. Whichever way you cut that, it means that things that we used to be able to do, we can't do anymore.

Tim Watkins (00:05:02):

Again, when you look for who are the clever people somewhere else, generally, they're the physicists and the engineers that everyone ignored over the years because what they were telling us wasn't a particularly nice message, that we, like children, wanted more goodies.

Nate Hagens (00:05:19):

I actually think that there are clever people and what we lack is wise people. The cleverness is because we look at the future with a technology lens and we don't look at the fact that, as Steve Keen would say, technology without energy is a sculpture. Many of the things in our environment, without cheap, readily available, abundant energy, our technology is a museum. It's a museum full of lifeless objects that once we're animate because of this surplus energy.

Nate Hagens (00:05:58):

I do think there are a lot of clever people that are optimizing for the wrong expectations because of our energy blindness. I don't think we're out of energy. We're just out of the cheap, a-hundred-million-barrels-a-day worth of energy that we just expect to continue in the future. Go a little deeper on that. You have likened the central bank role in the global economy to a pacemaker. Can you expand on that a little?

Tim Watkins (00:06:32):

Yeah. One of the views of 2008 is this was the crisis that should have caused us to change course. There was plenty of evidence out there that there were a whole series of gathering crises. You had the environment. You had energy getting ever more expensive. You had resource depletion. All of those things were coming together. What we should have done with 2008 was allow the system to collapse, then changed course. Instead, what we did was use these various central bank tricks basically to extend the problem into the future.

Tim Watkins (00:07:08):

Again, that's where there are clever people. They were looking for someone who will come along at some stage and teach us how to keep all of this going. Of course, nobody could. All of the people that knew anything about it were saying, "No. No. No. There are lots of things we can do, but the one thing we can't do is keep growing the economy the way we used to," so that we have to change course one way or another.

Tim Watkins (00:07:32):

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Now, rather than face up to that, certainly the central banks have used the various alchemy of central banking to keep the system going as if it's on life support, but it's like the patient is lying on the bed with the wires coming out it and beeping noises in the background. The patient is never getting up out of that bed in that state again.

Nate Hagens (00:07:54):

Let me ask you this. I have my own answer to this, but, like I just described, you've arrived at the same general conclusions that I have, and we've rarely interacted. Do you think, if the UK government or the US government, Boris Johnson or Joe Biden or even lower-level officials absolutely understood and agreed with what you just said, would that significantly change our trajectory, or are we in this metabolic straight jacket that, in order to keep GDP going, in order to keep people fed, in order to maintain stability, we have no choice but to continue to kick cans and hope that there are clever people in the future that figure some way out?

Tim Watkins (00:08:42):

Unfortunately, I tend towards the latter. I mean, there are people in mid-level government that get this stuff. The UK government has. I mean, I've read papers that were written for the government on resource depletion going back to, I think, 2007. It's not that somebody in government wasn't aware of it.

Tim Watkins (00:09:01):

The way government works, and I've done public policy work before now in my younger days, you get to know what subjects the minister wants to hear and what subjects the minister doesn't want to hear. You do something on resource depletion, but you know the minister isn't going to be interested. You put the report on the shelf and it's covering your back, that basically, if the proverbial hits the fan, I can say, "Well, yeah, minister, I gave you this report. We did this report years ago. It's not our fault." You know the minister isn't going to look at it, so you send the minister a report on something soft and cuddly that he can sell to the voters. The government works like that. It's like a filtering out pyramid where, at each stage up the pyramid, you lose information because people are self-censoring it.

Tim Watkins (00:09:53):

Now, if somebody like Boris Johnson actually got this stuff and decided to act on it, I think part of the problem with the organic, that this is just happening almost unconsciously, is it would be very difficult for a political leader to actually turn the ship around.

Tim Watkins (00:10:09):

That said, I mean, if you had honest politicians realizing this stuff and putting the truth on the table that, look, there are hard choices to make, but we have to make them, and what was the American Marine Corps saying, nobody left behind, that kind of message where we're going to do this in such a way that nobody starves. That might involve hardships all around, but we are going to save life here.

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That could work. I think that's the real outside possibility, the more likely, as everything carries on automatic pilot, I mean, until growth breaks down in a chaotic way.

Nate Hagens (00:10:50):

I haven't spoken to you about this, but I've given some talks to former governors, senators, congressmen in the US on the topic of advanced policy, which is recognizing our social and human behavior situation is one that is the truth. The list of prescriptions that our society will have to undergo in the coming decades are socially and politically unacceptable at the moment, but that, if you could educate, inform and develop break-glass-in-case-of-emergency plans and blueprints and build constituency and awareness of those behind the scenes, that's one way that you could short circuit this hierarchy of national political goals which is, first, I would argue, being reelected. Second is being popular, and only third is actually helping the longer-term constituency plans. When you bring a problem, I learned, unless you immediately have a solution, you shouldn't have even brought the problem to their attention.

Nate Hagens (00:12:02):

What do you think about this concept of advanced policy?

Tim Watkins (00:12:05):

One of the things that I looked into years ago was the emergency-planning process which, at the time I was looking at, it was still dealing with cold war, sort of what are we doing in a nuclear war? I think government ministers were being persuaded to the idea that there was a role for planning in civilian disasters and that actually we should do it that way around so that we figure out how do we keep people alive and keep things going, and then you integrate that approach back into how do we deal with the war so that war just becomes one of a series of possibilities that we have to deal with.

Tim Watkins (00:12:42):

Now, I think a lot of people get that idea. Let's pre-plan. Let's do what we can to stop people dying from this. I think the difficulty is how do you get that transition between where we are to an emergency basis because we tend to look backwards. One of the discussions here has been around could we introduce or reintroduce the wartime rationing that we had as a solution to food shortages, which sounds great on paper, but then people have looked at that now and said, "Well, the degree of complexity that we now have worked against it." Back then, pretty much everything we were doing was about expanding homegrown food production, which we had space to do in those days. We don't really have that space immediately.

Tim Watkins (00:13:29):

The other side of it was you had, back in the 1940s, this wonderful place called America on the other side of the Atlantic that could keep shoveling shiploads of food across. The crisis that we're in, that may not happen, so you have this problem. How do we keep 70 million people fed? At the moment, I think

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we produce the equivalent of 60% of our food, but, of course, some of that has to be exported to swap for other food coming in. We are heavily meat producing, which isn't good as all that you eat on. That should be a small amount of your diet, not all of it. We're actually very dependent on the Mediterranean, on Africa for vegetables and fruits being brought in.

Nate Hagens (00:14:13):

On the topic of food and shortages and rationing, I think we are on a much shortened runway with respect to the risks that you and I talk about because of the Ukraine-Russia situation. We talk about finance and commodities and energy blindness and how Europe is going to have to change or conserve because of the risk of Russia gas, but one thing that we don't often talk about, or at least I haven't, is the downstream effects of much higher costs of fertilizer, food, inability to afford in less developed, poorer countries, like ones in Africa and elsewhere. I think this year, 2022, there are going to be food shortages and maybe even famines because of, way downstream, the dominoes of the energy commodity, fertilizer, complexity, food chain, as it were from, from Europe.

Nate Hagens (00:15:19):

Do you have any thoughts on that?

Tim Watkins (00:15:21):

Yeah. I mean, I think that's now built into the system. I mean, in a way, I'm hoping that the only thing we have is higher-cost food. That would be a good positive outcome at this point.

Nate Hagens (00:15:33):

Why is that?

Tim Watkins (00:15:34):

Because I think there is going to be a shortage. I mean, fertilizer was already too expensive for all the farmers back in the autumn just from the rise in the price of gas. It has nothing to do with Ukraine. That was just the pandemic and the various supply chain disruption we created. Already, you had a position where the farmers weren't able to fertilize their crops, so we're going to get smaller, stunted growth. The yields are down for that reason, if only for that reason. Then you throw in that we've now sanctioned ourselves, so we can't buy Russian fertilizer. They're the world leading producer of nitrate and potash fertilizer.

Tim Watkins (00:16:16):

Again, that's worldwide now. We're starting to get a shortage. You've then got the problem that Russia itself is, I think, the world's leading supplier of wheat. Yes, Canada can increase its production. The USA, fingers crossed, can increase its production, but it's not going to make up for what we're losing from Russia, Ukraine, at the moment, the third biggest supplier, and people aren't able to get the crop into

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the ground. That says there's going to be a food shortage later this year. The questions then are is this going to be a shortage of an economic kind where it's just about the increased prices, or are we talking about absolutes where, if you like, in order for European mouths to be filled, African mouths have to go without food because, if it's that, it potentially is horrific?

Nate Hagens (00:17:03):

That's what happened in 2008. The price of wheat doubled the price of bread. For most Americans, that was no big deal, but, for people in Africa, they no longer could afford to buy bread. I think, as the energy surplus in our world declines, unless things change, there's a huge risk to those that have little access to purchasing power are going to be left without. You're saying that higher prices in some way is a good thing because it incentivizes better decisions on food?

Tim Watkins (00:17:41):

Yeah. I mean, I think in part it means that you haven't got the starvation that actually really wrecks economies. On the other side of it, as you say, you start to get an incentive then. If our imported food is that much more expensive, can we find local solutions that actually get around that, if fertilizer, which was going to go away anyway because fossil fuels are going away? Sooner or later, we have to find a way of fertilizing crop production without artificial fertilizers so that, again, the permaculture movement has its opportunity here. Are there ways that we can be doing this in such a way that we preserve and enhance soils rather than using soil like a sponge that you have to throw chemicals on every year just to get something out of them? Therein is the opportunity. It's just whether or not the disaster that could be coming turns out to be worse.

Nate Hagens (00:18:39):

I think that is a perfect parallel to the energy system because, if we had much higher, sustained energy prices because of Ukraine, Russia or whatever else, it would be a defacto carbon tax that we've been unable to implement for a long time. It's the market itself and depletion and geopolitical risks cause higher prices. If we had sustained higher prices, as long as it didn't break the financial musical chair, the central-bank-guarantee situation, much higher energy prices would cause us to innovate and conserve. All those would be good things except for it's the Wile E. Coyote moment you mentioned earlier, that if we can't continue to grow, if you do a flow chart of all our possible outcomes, if no growth, then financial recalibration and, once that happens, then all kinds of other things bubble up and become important.

Tim Watkins (00:19:44):

Yes. One of the things I was thinking with getting into our lifestyles really from... I mean, certainly anybody my age. I mean, I'm in my early 60s. We've grown up through this period of massively expanding energy. To give an example, a house that I was born in, not every room had a plug socket because they weren't sure whether you'd need them in those days. I think the kitchen had a socket

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because you have... I think we had the first refrigerators coming in those days. A lot of electrical goods at that time came with a socket that plugged into the light socket because, again, they weren't sure whether you were going to have the socket on the wall. In the course of my life, I've seen houses now where it is unusual to have a room that only has one socket. There are electric plugs, and you've now got UBS plugs to go with the three-pin plugs. We have so much energy-dependent stuff that we've become used to.

Tim Watkins (00:20:43):

When I grew up, it was unusual for a family to have a car. Most of us got around either walking or you used public transport. Only your fairly well-off middle class type people had cars. By the time I was into my 20s, it was common for everyone to have a car. By the time I hit my 40s, it was common for everyone to have two cars. You had the one big car for commuting back and forth to work, had a small little runaround for your partner to go to the shops while you were out at work. I mean, now, there are even people in my street that have three cars. Essentially, the lives that we've developed revolve around this without anyone stopping to look at what are the costs of my doing this? We had this. You chase the big job in the city rather than the lower-paid job closer to home because of this drive to be on the promotion ladder that you are always striving to be better off.

Tim Watkins (00:21:39):

Now, once you start adding all of the costs, so what is the cost of buying the car? Well, you're into tens of thousands of pounds. Then you've got the cost of insuring, taxing, getting it all roadworthy, the annual maintenance, the fuel cost, which is going through the roof these days. Increasingly here, you can't go anywhere in a car without having to pay a fairly hefty parking price nowadays, and then the government has taken to taxing a workplace parking space as if it's a benefit. They charge you a tax on being able to park, so you can't get away from parking. Some of the bigger cities, you have congestion charges that are meant to deter you driving into the city. Add it all together, and your annual cost of running a car is going to be at least 5,000 pounds. In some cases, it may run to 10 grand.

Tim Watkins (00:22:30):

Think of it another way. You could say, well, hang on, I could take a 10 grand cut in pay, take the job around the corner which I can walk to. I'm actually no worse off. In some ways, I'm better off because, instead of driving and getting stressed out, I'm walking to work and getting a bit fit and getting some fresh air. The pace of the job, because it's lower paid, is likely to be less stressful, though not always. You can have a whole load of benefits without any actual financial cost even though it looks like you're taking this big drop in wages. Now, as the energy gets more expensive, I think more and more people will look at that kind of trade off, that actually the game of chasing the high pay in the big city is no longer worth what you get at the end.

Nate Hagens (00:23:16):

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I totally agree with you. I don't suspect it's a fully mathematical choice. I think the other thing missing, which also could change, is the status loss associated with getting a local job around the corner relative to the big job in the city that, even if all those things were economically better off, people en masse might shift to the local job around the corner if that was socially acceptable and advocated. We may be heading for that environment.

Nate Hagens (00:23:51):

I mean, we are alive during the grand finale of a firework show, and it's just oohs and aah. We don't realize that that's almost out of fireworks. I don't think people recognize that's the situation we are in living during the midway of the Carbon Pulse and the second half or the last third of the Carbon Pulse. There's plenty of energy left, but it's deeper, more costly, more environmentally destructive, more complex, and it's not going to provide the same benefits as the first half.

Nate Hagens (00:24:30):

Let me get back to something you asked or you pointed out earlier. You had some health problems you said 12 years ago or so. Do you think that dealing with your own mortality or the finiteness of a situation allowed or opened some mental windows to you to research this stuff? The reason I ask is I've also had some serious health problems that, when I addressed them, my mind opened up to looking at the totality of our system. It was just like a key opened the lock and I was able to synthesize these things in a more real way.

Nate Hagens (00:25:14):

Do you think there's any validity to that, that we have this such an aversion to death and end of growth and those sorts of things that there's an emotional maturity bump that has to be passed for us to personally acknowledge the severity of the situation? What do you think about that?

Tim Watkins (00:25:34):

Yeah, I think because, I mean, the culture we're in is very youth-orientated to the extent that lots of people pretend to be young far past their sell-by date. Yeah, I mean the denial of death. We are in this cycle. You were born. You grew for a bit. I think some of us passed this age where you stop growing and then you start growing sideways instead.

Nate Hagens (00:26:01):

Hear. Hear.

Tim Watkins (00:26:03):

Okay. With mine, I think it was more I think coming to terms with the idea of a morbidity, that, as long as you're physically fit, you can pretend that you're still youthful and vibrant. I mean, before I got ill, I was doing big, long charity bike rides up and down through the mountains in South Wales, which I

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could only dream about being able to do these days, but suddenly being hit with, "Actually, you're going to have this condition. There's no cure for it. All you can do is hold it in remission," and part of the remission is you're going to take drugs that make you ill. It's your choice. Either you take the drugs and you get ill, but you can live with it, or you don't take the drugs and you die. I guess, like most people, I've opted for I'll take the drugs and deal with the side effects.

Tim Watkins (00:26:57):

You have that kind of realization that, actually, there are things that I used to be able to do that I can no longer do. Of course, that's almost a model for the economy and the way of life that we've got that, if you like, the energy that's driven this complexity, this system that we've built totally unconsciously, but that energy has gone. It's almost like somebody that's coming into touch with, if you like, shaping from maturity into old age, that we're now crossing this boundary where, suddenly, we've got to sit back and say, well, what actually matters here? All of that extra vibrance that we used to have to drive things, that's gradually closing in. Now, we've got to look at, well, what are the things that give meaning to us? What are the things that actually matter?

Tim Watkins (00:27:46):

Yeah, and the clue is it isn't having likes on Facebook or people sharing your Twitter post or whatever. There are much deeper things in life that you get to look at. Maybe, as a system, we need to be doing that as well. I mean, my ex-wife, who is sadly dear departed, would've probably claimed that a Gucci handbag was something essential. Everyone's definition is going to be different, but some narrowing into what are the essentials here that we need to preserve, because the danger is that we end up with a lot of stuff that we don't need because that's what our current price signals tell us that we ought to do. The gaps in the things that we do need, because nobody took the time to step aside and say what is important, that's a discussion we need to be having, but I don't think many people are.

Nate Hagens (00:28:37):

Is that happening at all in Wales after COVID and high prices of gas and things like that especially in the rural areas? Are these conversations starting to happen or not really?

Tim Watkins (00:28:50):

I think there are some food sustainability groups that are getting going. I mean, I'm seeing a lot of shift in the way people are addressing political issues. People that used to be very solidly in one direction or another, I'm seeing a lot more people wavering, which I think is a good thing because I think that's people being forced to think for themselves.

Tim Watkins (00:29:13):

One other thing is I had a conversation with my son over New Year. Because he's very heavily involved with Extinction Rebellion, he was asking me, effectively, who do I turn to to deal with this stuff? I made

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the point that, "Well, if you're sat in the room and you're looking around and nobody else is dealing with it and you are asking who should I turn to deal with this, well, actually, it's you. You're the one in the room that's thinking about it. You're the grown up here. It's you that's got to do it."

Tim Watkins (00:29:45):

In a way, I think part of where we've been for the last maybe three or four decades has been a gradual infantilizing of our politics, if you like. I mean, the politicians have encouraged it so that we look at them as surrogate parents that we have to go to to say, please, Mr. Politician, will you do whatever, take the global warming away or find some extra oil? What we've ceased or all too often have ceased doing is actually having the wherewithal to do it ourselves. If you're in somewhere like Mid Wales where it's possible to do sustainable farming, don't wait for Boris Johnson to legislate it. Just do it. If the model works, then people next door will start doing it. Then everybody else will join in.

Tim Watkins (00:30:30):

In a sense, part of our problem is just expecting government to be like the green energy fairy or that they've got the magic wands somewhere, but they're refusing to wave it because of all of these corporate interests. Well, no, they haven't got a magic wand. All of us are trying to work this out as we go along. There is nobody making the story up. We are part of the story. We are how we make this up.

Nate Hagens (00:31:01):

How would you? I mean, I actually agree with that. I think we're so comfortable with Netflix and chill and ordering products on Amazon, and everything is so easy. I also think there's some apathy because people see the world as so screwed up. They just want to, bread and circuses, just disconnect. There's also a fatigue of sorts that we probably, on this conversation which is recorded on April 11th, 2022, this is the highest chance of nuclear war, nuclear exchange in yours or my lifetimes. Why isn't there widespread demonstrations for peace or no nuclear war? Nothing else matters other than that. It's like people are just disconnected.

Nate Hagens (00:31:59):

How would you? I think when there is a crisis in the future, and there invariably will be because we're juggling a lot of plates in the air and the time horizon of the next can kick, the half life of that, becomes shorter and shorter, we will respond. We will suck it up and make hard choices, and there will be beautiful examples of community leadership and creativity and new local biophysical MacGyver stuff.

Nate Hagens (00:32:32):

In your history as mental health advocate and dealing with depression and other issues, are there any... Well, shortcuts isn't the right word, but are there any paths towards self-sovereignty, taking agency,

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making unconditional goals in your own life? Are there any recommended paths that maybe even people listening to this podcast could get ahead of the curve on what you just described?

Tim Watkins (00:33:03):

I mean, there are. At the time I had depression, it was just at the point where people were starting to talk openly about mental health. Prior to that, very stigmatized, it wasn't something you wanted to ever admit to having gone through. We had to actually learn a lot of this for ourselves. We were presented with a medical model that, if you like, this idea that we have these serotonin reuptake inhibitors, we'll give you those, and they'll replace this chemical imbalance in your brain, which I think one of the critics of this pointed out this is the same logic that would say that, if a paracetamol cures a headache, that means an absence of paracetamol must be the cause of the headache. Well, no, it's more complicated than that.

Nate Hagens (00:33:53):

What's a para? Para what?

Tim Watkins (00:33:56):

Paracetamol.

Nate Hagens (00:33:57):

What is that?

Tim Watkins (00:33:59):

It's an anti-inflammatory. It's similar to aspirin, but it's different.

Nate Hagens (00:34:06):

Oh, okay. Got it.

Tim Watkins (00:34:07):

Yeah. I mean, we were presented with this medical model of how you deal with mental health. The more we looked into it, the more that model broke down. The very name, antidepressant, was deliberately coined by the psychiatrist to give them a pseudo-medical intervention. It was the idea that you have antibiotics, so we'll call our drug anti-depressant. There was nothing really that medical about them in those terms. Yes, they were intervening as best they could. I mean, I have nothing but respect for the people working in that profession who do an enormously good job, but I think they were foundering as well because you couldn't reproduce any of their findings. What seemed to work for one person wouldn't work for a whole load of other people.

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Tim Watkins (00:35:05):

One of the things, a piece of research I did when I was doing the campaigning, I'd ask people about which professions they found to be the most helpful in recovering from a mental health problem. You had people like occupational therapists, physiotherapists. You had the psychologists, the psychiatrists, the counselors, a whole raft of different people who may have been involved. What came out of it was different people found different professions to be the profession that helped them get out of the problem.

Nate Hagens (00:35:38):

No one size fits all.

Tim Watkins (00:35:40):

Well, when we dug into it, it turned out it was the one professional that let the professional masks drop. If you like, if you're going to spend your day having to sit in front of a load of people who for one reason or another are quite irrational, one of the things that we tend to do is put up a boundary between ourselves and that person so that the relationship is very professional.

Tim Watkins (00:36:04):

I think it was Erving Goffman who picked this up years ago where they did an experiment, where they got an actor to play the part of a mentally ill person and put that person in the mental hospital. None of the professional people could figure out that this guy was putting it on, but all of the actual patients got it straight away because it's like the boundaries are still there.

Tim Watkins (00:36:26):

When you're mentally ill, your boundaries are short, so you're opened and exposed to the world and foundering around. You encounter a professional person, and the one thing you want them to do is be a human being, and they can't do it because, for professional reasons, they need that barrier. Now, of course, the person that people were encountering who finally made the breakthrough was the guy that turned around and said, "Look, forget all of the professional stuff. Let's go to the pub. Let's just go and be two people speaking to each other, and let's talk this through."

Nate Hagens (00:37:03):

At the core, what you're saying is we're people that have depression, are at core lonely and starve for authentic human connection. I know it's not as simple as that, but, in this example, you don't want a clinical observation of what's wrong with you and a lecture on various steps. You want a real, authentic relationship with another human being or a dog or a tree or whatever you're lacking.

Tim Watkins (00:37:36):

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Yes, that inability to connect with people because, I mean, in a sense, I always used to say, well, people worry about interacting with somebody with depression often because you're worried about doing the wrong thing. The trouble is that the wrong thing is to avoid interacting with the person. In a sense, it's not through a deliberate exclusion. It's just people are concerned like, "What if I say or do the wrong thing? I could make this person's situation worse," so people will tend to withdraw from it, but then that very withdrawal of social contact is what drives the depression.

Tim Watkins (00:38:14):

Very often, people's story through depression is very much that downward cycle of... Say, a common new way of getting depressed that we found was people would lose their jobs largely because employers didn't know how to deal with depression either. For a lot of employers, it's just, "Look, just get rid of the person. Sign them off on sickness grounds. Get them out of here," so that person would suddenly be divorced from their work, which had been a large part of their life. They're also now without an income. Very quickly after that, the relationships break down. They lose their housing. Suddenly, life implodes and that person, just at the time where they need support in place, all of the support mechanisms that we all tend to have are blown away. What that person then has to do one way or another is gradually build the support process back into place, which is a hell of a hard job.

Tim Watkins (00:39:13):

What we started looking at, because one of the things I wanted to learn from back in those days is, instead of constantly focusing on the people that are real, which was where a lot of the professional people were at the time, let's ask our service users how they're doing. What I got into was, well, what about asking the people who used to be service users, but are now better? Let's go and talk to them because they actually have information about how you do this. Sure enough, if you split yourself down as a person, you have a biological you.

Tim Watkins (00:39:47):

One of the things we used to teach when I was teaching how to deal with depression, nobody in all of your growing up ever taught you how to breathe. One of the most simple things, I mean we do it naturally, unconsciously, and yet the way in which you breathe has a huge impact not just on your physical being, but on your emotional and your mental state. You can actually trigger a stress fight-or-flight response just by breathing shallowly from the top of the chest, so shallow, rapid breathing. Of course, one of the things that causes that is that... I mean, everyone knows the depressed posture where you're curled up with your knees up. I think that's so common. You find it in the animal kingdom as well as amongst humans. It's a very biologically driven posture. Of course, it's very similar to what it feels like to sit in a car. You're hunched up behind the steering wheel. You've got your legs in an awkward position.

Tim Watkins (00:40:45):

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I mean, anyone listening to this now, if you try this, so you hold your hand out as if you are driving the car. You've got the steering wheel there. Now, grab the steering wheel, and now ask yourself what's happening to either muscles in your jaw, because if you do it, you'll feel the muscles are tightening right there. We have these biological connections that nobody teaches us about. It's basically you get into a physical downward spiral because the way you are reacting to the depression is making the depression worse, but you don't know that.

Tim Watkins (00:41:18):

There's a whole social side of things, what I used to call the quick fixes, which basically... and all of us have these. Basically, there are things that we learned at some stage in our development, so some people will, when they're stressed, they'll have a glass of wine or a bottle of Largo or whatever. Other people will smoke a cigarette. Somebody else will eat chocolate. We all recognize these, that we have these ways of de-stressing. The problem then is, when you start going over the edge into depression, you start going to those comforts and you do them to excess. You're no longer smoking half a dozen cigarettes a day. You're now smoking 40 or 60, and your lungs are getting completely wrecked or, instead of just going to the bar and having a couple of drinks on the way home, you're staying in the bar till dawn or midnight, and you're arriving home half cut and you're going to have a hangover in the morning.

Nate Hagens (00:42:14):

What do those things do to the brain that in the short term are antidotes to the stresses and depression, et cetera? What's what's happening?

Tim Watkins (00:42:26):

I mean, in terms probably that... I've seen you use on some of your lectures. You talk about the dopamine system. My preference I think for explaining it to people is something I heard from a religious guy who said, "Look, every one of us has a God shaped hole in the middle of us, and we keep trying to find things to fill it with." Now, either way, either this is your dopamine system driving you to, "I've got to act. I've got to do something," I think it comes back to we're the only animal that has outsourced a part of our digestive system, that where other animals are self-contained in their environment, we're not. We need energy in order to consume.

Tim Watkins (00:43:08):

I think it's somewhere in the evolution of the dopamine system around that has left all of us with this sensation that I am in some way not complete, and then you try to fill the hole. You say, well, what can I fill this hole with? Well, there's a cigarette. There's a glass of wine. There's a cup of coffee. I'll get in the car and drive really fast, turn the stereo on full blast.

Nate Hagens (00:43:33):

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Or look at Bitcoin quotes or the stock market or go shopping or any of those other things. It's actually our culture itself is causing this because, as we get higher and higher on the dopamine ratchet, our brain naturally secretes less dopamine and it causes the reuptake, the receptors not to take it in as much. We have to find some other way of getting it. If we can't get it, then let's go gambling or to the pub or pornography or any of these things, which then that behavior itself makes us feel crappier afterwards. It's a cycle.

Nate Hagens (00:44:14):

I think what's missing is we've outsourced, like you said, our digestion, but we've also outsourced the social contract because we're so rich in energy. We each have our own little kingdoms where we order stuff in and we've neglected the biggest part of what makes us a successful historical species other than the cleverness, but the biggest part is our social contract, our social interaction with, historically, bands of other people that lived right with us 24/7. I think that also is both a risk and a blessing. The risk is that we've ignored it, and we're unhealthy on account of it. The blessing is that, as energy surplus goes away, we're going to be forced to interact more with other people. That's going to be messy, and there's going to be drama and gossip and conflict, but that's something that our phenotypically, historically humans dealt well with.

Nate Hagens (00:45:18):

My purpose, one of my main purposes, of doing this podcast is that we can start building that and the social networks ahead of what I refer to as The Great Simplification because we're going to be forced to do that. The sooner we can build those networks and social capital and getting to know people a little bit less superficially than we do right now is going to be beneficial.

Nate Hagens (00:45:45):

Getting back to what you were saying, Tim, what are some other things to do? You researched the people that had depression and then were over it. What were some other findings that you had?

Tim Watkins (00:45:58):

One of the things that depression, I think why... because it is an evolutionary thing, because you see it in other animals, you see it in every human culture and throughout history.

Nate Hagens (00:46:09):

What was adaptive about depression in the past?

Tim Watkins (00:46:13):

What it appears to be, and I'm certainly not the only person to say this, and there are other psychiatrists that have written this up, it's actually our way of, if you like, it's your system's way of saying, "Look, you need to take a break here. Time out. You can't carry on doing the stuff that you're

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doing." As I say, all of those quick fixes that the dopamine system does, that's almost like the symptom that you're running through a crisis. We all see it in people. It's, "Hey, Bob's put on more weight recently," or, "I noticed Jack is down at the pub awful lot these days." You see that before that person actually has the full-blown crisis, but, if you like, the depression is the way of saying, whatever it is that's driving that stress, your system can no longer take it. You're going to break down. You're just going to stop.

Tim Watkins (00:47:05):

Now, in the kind of societies that you were just talking about where we have social contracts and strong social bonds, there is a recognition that, hang on, we need to help this person. This person is a casualty here. It's up to us to pull together around them. Why it's such a problem here is because we've disconnected ourselves.

Tim Watkins (00:47:26):

There's a guy called David Goodhart in the UK who wrote this book about... I think it's a kind of revenge of somewhere, he calls it. There are these two groups broadly. There's a group that went off to university that uprooted and, basically, they can interchange. Wherever they go to live, they just do what they did when they went off to college. You just get yourself a flat somewhere, get your laptop open and connect with everyone online. There's another group which he called the Somewheres who were the people that didn't get to go to university who relied far more on family and community, tended to end up in lower-paid local jobs, but they stayed connected.

Tim Watkins (00:48:07):

Now, his argument is that a lot of what's gone wrong politically on both sides of the Atlantic recently is that all of those networks that enabled the Somewheres to eke out some kind of living had been dismantled so that, if you like, family, just preserving a family became a struggle, and things that used to be support networks started becoming all need and no giving back. His argument was you've got these Anywheres that were very much the product of the conservatism in the 1950s, so that people in the '50s started realizing, hey, our families our really constraining. Everybody gets to know your business. There are all these sort of social mores that prevent you from being yourself.

Tim Watkins (00:48:57):

Then you get through that period of the 1960s where it's suddenly all self-actualization and kind of, "Let's break down all of these old-fashioned traditions and let's be free." Then you get the translation of that into the politics. Governments no longer do things. They just legislate things, and everyone's on their own. Where we've got to is this place where so many people are not anchored to anything.

Tim Watkins (00:49:22):

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In a way, going back to my health condition or your health condition that, for a long time, you get away with it because, as long as you've got money in your pocket, you can buy your way around the things you lack. When you get hit with something, you suddenly realize. I mean, I did myself. There are a number of close friends and family who, without them, I wouldn't have survived this. You learn actually that these connections that you've been taking for granted are hugely important to us.

Tim Watkins (00:49:50):

Going forward, I think, as you say, to one degree, yes, we're going to be forced into this and, I think, actually negotiating it now because it is a big transition for a lot of people. I'm going to go from this life where I can have nothing to do with people almost and just watch Netflix and order pizza in. I can do all of that stuff and appear to be self-contained, but I'm not really self-contained. As we go forward, I'm going to need to actually reconnect and, as I say, probably interact with people who up until now you wouldn't have chosen to interact with and maybe work together with people not necessarily because you would've chosen to, but because you're going to have to.

Nate Hagens (00:50:33):

If there's someone listening to this right now that is nodding their head and agreeing with you on your logic that that is coming and that that makes sense, what would be a couple of first steps that you could recommend that they do to start that path?

Tim Watkins (00:50:49):

I mean, making or keeping contact with family if you have family, and that's more than just sharing something on Facebook once every six months, talking to your neighbors. We have at the moment, I think, I'm going to talk about my own situation, that you have this benign indifference so we don't interfere with each other, but we would look out for each other if we needed to. I mean, making sure that you at least have that, that you know who your neighbors are and looking at what are the community groups in my local area, so within walking distance because, again, there's no point in having a lot of your activity 20 miles away if the car is going away.

Tim Watkins (00:51:30):

You need to talk about what's immediately within walking or cycling distance. You don't wait for them to come to you. Connect with them. There will be things that you want to engage with, and there will be a community out there somewhere that shares those interests. Now is the time to connect with them and actually do it physically. Get to know the person behind the social media page because actually the better you build those bonds now, the easier it's going to be later on.

Nate Hagens (00:52:00):

I think there are some scenarios where the car goes away. I think the more likely scenarios are the widespread, ubiquitous, cheap everyday use of the car goes away for most people. There will still be

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cars. I think one possible, even likely, scenario is that the technology and the lower energy surplus will go to a smaller percentage of the population, and a lot of other people will be left with very little. In which case, the meek shall inherit the earth sort of thing. We have to have social capital and natural capital and human capital, skills and knowledge and things like what you're you're talking about.

Nate Hagens (00:52:45):

Getting back to something you said earlier, that people put themselves in a situation where they have shallow, rapid breathing because of their posture or other things, and that engenders a fight-or-flight response and contributes to a positive feedback of anxiety or other issues, I've been learning about this, Tim, because I have had some recognition of my own habits and poor breathing.

Nate Hagens (00:53:15):

Sometimes, I'm on the phone 10 hours a day. You can tell by my personality, even though we don't know each other real well, that I kind of talk a mile a minute. I really deeply fricking care about what's coming, and so I'm talking to people like you, and then I have another phone call after this, and I find by five or six o'clock I haven't taken a deep breath all fricking day. It's not healthy, and so I've recently bought some bonsai trees. I've hired a breathing coach locally that we do a little yoga and breathing. I've found that I can exhale way more than I do normally and that, after I do that for five minutes, I feel calmer, I feel clearer.

Nate Hagens (00:53:58):

I'm just trying to put in a speed bump in my routine where on the hour I just take five deep breaths just on the hour. I'm a total newbie on this stuff, but I realize, in my mid-50s, I have not been breathing properly my entire life. Do you have any... just short bullet points on recommendations to people who might never have thought about this, like I hadn't, until recently? Do you have any advice on that?

Tim Watkins (00:54:28):

The one with body posture because that's a simple one, which is just to hold your shoulders back for a bit. If you can get the shoulder blades to meet in the middle, so much the better. It's pulling your head upwards.

Nate Hagens (00:54:39):

What does that do?

Tim Watkins (00:54:41):

There was a guy on one of the courses that I taught on how to deal with depression. One of the things that really brought him down was he kept talking about the amount of chewing gum that was left on the pavements. Basically, one of the things I spotted with him is he was constantly hunched over so his visual horizon was very, very low down. When I got him to do that, he suddenly opened up. I

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encouraged him to walk like that. One of the things that he noticed was he started making eye contact with people that he was getting passed, and then he started saying hi to people, and then he recognized somebody that he'd been in school with. They stopped and they chatted. He got that realization that, just the posture, just looking down all the time, was disconnecting him, so there's one on the posture.

Tim Watkins (00:55:28):

The breathing one though, the simplest one you can do as a starter, is put one hand on the sternum, so the bone in the middle of the chest, one hand on the belly, and just, as you're breathing in through the nose, you're just trying to lift the belly one straight out forward and the chest one forward end up. If you just do that a couple of times, you'll start to feel the stress dropping away. They're simple things that probably everyone should have been taught in junior school, but somehow we never got around to it, although it always seemed to me that there seemed to be much more academic things to learn. Yes, just basic posture and that basic breathing so that you are accessing the whole of the lung rather than just the top bit. That in itself is a huge de-stressor.

Nate Hagens (00:56:20):

I wonder if people that are fluent in the end-of-growth human predicament risks the way that you write about on your blog, I wonder if we subconsciously naturally have worse posture because it's not like this up and proud, "Hey, listen to me. The end of growth is coming. Look at this." It's like you're retreating a little bit because you feel not shame, but some self-awareness that what you're sharing with other people is heavy and you might be making them sad or changing their expectations. You almost are in this conciliatory posture telling the story. I'm just thinking about it from my own experience. I'm not this cocksure Wall Street broker confidently selling a security to someone. This is heavy shit that we're talking about. It's almost like you invariably adopt an Eeyore posture just out of deference. Is there some validity to that?

Tim Watkins (00:57:24):

Yes. I mean, on one level, I think all of us, or not all of us, most of us anyway, have an inbuilt aversion to upsetting other people, whether that comes from parenting or, I mean, basically or caring for somebody that you have that idea that I want to make things right. When I started researching the crises that we're in, my hope was that there was an answer out there, but nobody had found it yet at. There was that. I mean, to this day, I always say I'm 99% certain where this is going, but I'll leave the 1% that somebody might come along and say, hey, I've discovered dilithium crystals from Star Trek and we're all saved. I mean, my view of that is, well, we're not actually saved. We've just given ourselves a whole load of new problems to deal with.

Nate Hagens (00:58:18):

No, I totally agree, this is not a technology or energy problem. This is a cultural problem.

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Tim Watkins (00:58:23):

Yeah, so, within that, I think, yes. I mean, one doesn't want to say something that's going to upset people. On the other hand, the message is, if you've bought into this technological utopian future where we all drive around in flying cars, we send rocket ships to Mars and do all of that stuff, well, I'm sorry, but that version of the future got canceled. Where are we now? Well, there are a number of futures that are possible within the physical constraints of where we are. None of them are going to be as materially abundant as these, but that doesn't mean to say necessarily that they have to be miserable ways of living.

Tim Watkins (00:59:06):

I mean, if we're not careful, we will go through a period of misery because, if we have to do this the hard way and have everything fall apart, then, yes, you're going to get people going hungry because we're not producing enough food. You're going to get people dying of hypothermia in winter because we have no heating. There is a need to plan this out in such a way that we get to a realistic future, as I say, without leaving anybody behind on the battlefield.

Tim Watkins (00:59:34):

One of the things I go back to is what actually gives you meaning in life. I remember, again, back in the days when we were researching depression, there was a piece of research. It was a woman that had worked as a hospice nurse who'd gone around collecting dying patients'... their life stories. One of the questions that she'd asked these people, and these were people within days, if not weeks, of dying. She'd ask them, "What are the things you regret?" Of course, not one of them says, well, yeah, I really regret not getting that promotion or not having that pay raise or not getting the bigger car. All of them regretted, "I regret that I didn't get to spend more time with my family, that there were things that I wanted to tell my partner that I never got around to telling them."

Tim Watkins (01:00:25):

All of these things are very human and very social things that people regretted in the end. In a sense, one of the things that I can tell anyone that's listening here is, when it's your turn, you won't be regretting the pay raise that you didn't get or the extra car or whatever. The things that you will regret are the interactions you have with people that mattered, and that, as you, like me, are still here, there's still a chance for you to put that right.

Nate Hagens (01:00:50):

Incorporate a no-regret philosophy a little bit more into your daily routine.

Tim Watkins (01:00:57):

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Yeah. As I said, make more time for people because, in the end, that's what matters. There is nothing in an economy that runs on, what, 60% of the energy that we currently have that in any way has to prevent you from interacting with the people that you care about.

Nate Hagens (01:01:14):

Well, relative to the story you said before where you had one outlet in your room when you were younger, that was a totally different energy existence. There's a lot of steps between here and there. I do worry that we are so conditioned to expect more gadgets and more conveniences every year that we neglect the reality that, if we had 30% less, 40% less, we would still be one of the richest generations of our species on the history of this planet.

Nate Hagens (01:01:48):

One thing we didn't talk about is the natural ecosystems that have arguably declined by more than 30 or 40%. There is that, and we're going to have to deal with that one way or another, so, Tim, I would like to ask you some questions that I ask all of my guests. As you know, I'm a college teacher. What kind of advice would you give to young people who would today discover and understand that they're alive during this time when 10,000 years of can kicking is going to culminate and the risks to our economies, climate change, living situations that we've discussed, the general human predicament? What kind of advice would you give?

Tim Watkins (01:02:28):

Most profound is one that I alluded to earlier, which is have the recognition that nobody is writing the script for you, that this life that you are in is the one that you create for yourself. Now, that said, we create our lives within the conditions that surround us. I am not going to have the flying car even though it was promised to me when I was growing up. That isn't going to happen, but I can determine the kind of relations that I have with people. Now, perhaps a slightly trickier one, but start to look at what are the things that you are naturally talented in and try to drive for those, because I think a lot of people in this culture are encouraged to do a lot of things that aren't really them. We're encouraged to do it for the money or for the status. Actually try to find a sense of what drives you, what gives you purpose because, if you can align your life with that and, in the end, it doesn't matter what anybody else says, this is your life, not theirs.

Tim Watkins (01:03:37):

Now, if in the process of doing this you can look after yourself physically, look after yourself emotionally and look after yourself mentally, which means actually recognizing that those are three different parts of us, the one that I was used to describe them is how we respond to stresses. Stress is a very physical thing. That's about the enhanced breathing, the extra heart rate, the tensed muscles. Stress is physical. Anxiety is the emotional sense that you have from that. How do I feel? Then worry is

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the mental manifestation of it. Worry is almost always about the future. It isn't happening now, so one of the ways that you get out of anxiety spiral is to realize that, no, no, no, now is okay.

Tim Watkins (01:04:26):

If the physical stuff is going actually, I always used to relate to it as it's a physical response that's misplaced. If you like, your body is reacting as if you are fighting and fighting, but your body isn't. One of the ways of dealing with that physical stuff is to actually do something that would use extra adrenaline and extra breathing. I used to get out and go cycling, or you go for a jog or just go for a walk. Do something physical because, when you are doing something physical, if you start getting shorter breath and heart racing, you don't get anxious about it because that's how it's meant to be. You only get anxious about it because you're getting that symptom while you're sat in a chair and it's misplaced.

Nate Hagens (01:05:14):

So you're saying that -- Stress, anxiety and worry are, to me, all the same synonyms -- but you're saying they're the physical, emotional and mental manifestations of the same thing, but, on the physical side, if you mitigate that by exercising, by breathing, by changing your posture, you can also influence the anxiety and the worry downstream of that.

Tim Watkins (01:05:37):

Yes, because I think one of the therapies that came out back in the '80s and early '90s was about cognition, and they got it the wrong way around because their view was the process starts with the thought and then causes the physical. More often than not, it's the other way around. I think it was to do with a lot of the psychiatrists that worked on this stuff weren't particularly in touch with their own emotions. They were coming at it from a very heady place and started saying, "Oh, it's all in the head." Of course, realistically, it's all three.

Tim Watkins (01:06:07):

In the same way, you can say, well, physically, if I've got the physical symptoms or something, I can learn how to breathe. I can do physical things that alleviate it. They're the same things with the emotions, which is where a lot of the dopamine stuff comes in. I feel bad, so I'm going to have a cigarette or a beer or whatever. I'm part of the downfall. At the end of that is the realization that I've done something not for a positive reason, but to alleviate a negative.

Nate Hagens (01:06:36):

I've never smoked a cigarette in my life, but I have had beer. The next time that I'm really craving a beer or a glass of wine, what should be my mental process if I know that I really shouldn't do that because I've been doing it too much or whatever? What is the mental process there?

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Tim Watkins (01:06:54):

I mean, I wouldn't start with saying I shouldn't, because your system will fight you. The system will actually make the drive even more. It's more, okay, if you like, I'm going to watch myself consciously while I drink the beer. So rather than saying I won't do it because the world is full of failures down that road, I mean the, "I promise. I want St. Francis to give me celibacy, but not just yet," the, "Yes, I'll give up the beer, but just this one."

Tim Watkins (01:07:29):

A better way of approaching it is to say, well, let's watch my conscious, my emotions and my physical response to having the beer. If you like, rather than doing it unconsciously as a reflex, let's do it as a conscious. I'm going to have a beer. I'm going to enjoy it. I'm going to savor the taste of it. I'm going to be aware of the effect of the alcohol as it hits my system. I'm going to try and track all of that processes so that this becomes a much more, a much better understood thing. Gradually, within that, instead of having the craving of it, you understand what it's doing. You can start to say, well, actually I can take it or leave it now. I'm not going to beat myself up if I do have a beer, but there are other ways of dealing with this emotional situation that leads me to have a beer.

Nate Hagens (01:08:17):

It's like having little Nate watching big Nate have a beer or five beers and, over time, that becomes a little bit of a neocortical trump card or referee over my limbic system and my supernormal stimuli hijack. It empowers my neocortex a little bit. It creates a speed bump in my behaviors because I'm more consciously doing it.

Tim Watkins (01:08:48):

Yes. As I said, there is no route that gets there from abstinence. I mean, that just makes you feel even more miserable and probably, instead of having five lagers, you're going to have 10.

Nate Hagens (01:09:00):

I think it's a real risk, Tim, going forward. I mean, I think you've pointed this out somewhere in your writings. I've seen it, and I've seen it elsewhere, that the number one cause of death after the breakup of the Soviet Union was alcoholism. I'm afraid now the S&P is near all-time highs and, ostensibly, we're at the height of our civilization, yet 30 to 40% of college students have depression or anxiety. I think we're already facing a mental health crisis, and we haven't even hit the end of growth yet. That's why I think it's imperative that we have practices, practitioners, coaches, people that, like you said earlier, let people take their masks down and just authentically relate to another human being because I think, on top of the physical limits to growth, the mental response to that especially in rich countries is going to be enormous. Do you agree?

Tim Watkins (01:10:08):

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Yeah. Certainly, the last decade, we've seen this huge upswell of anger amongst people. Interesting, all of the people that tell you that you shouldn't hate somebody else very often are the most hateful in their own way of expressing themselves. See? I guess that all of us are being faced with, if you like, how we were told that the world ought to be, and all of the things that we internalized about who we ought to be increasingly ramming against this brick wall of, basically, an economy that I think for half of the population has been going down already. There are large sections of us that have seen our own personal de-growth over the last decade.

Tim Watkins (01:10:51):

One of the things that interested me in the USA, I mean, if you look at... I think it was Oakland, in California. There's a guy that posts videos of a place called Kensington Avenue in Philadelphia. They're all of these places that have these sprawling tent cities of homeless people, people that are drug addicted, people that are overdoing the fentanyl. There is de-growth in front of you. It hasn't hit the majority of the population yet. Of course, that is a very dysfunctional way of doing it because it's basically the rich half of the population turning their backs on the poor half of the population and saying either, "We don't care," or, "I haven't got time for this."

Tim Watkins (01:11:34):

Of course, then that translates into this divisive politics of the reason for this is your side. No, it's your side, so that, if we get the guy with the different colored tie into the White House or into 10 Downing Street, then everything will be better. Whereas the reality is, no, none of that matters, that what we're facing here is something far more profound. Part of it is learning to un-script the story that we've been told about what life was meant to be. Yes, some of it will be pointing at people my age and saying, "Look, it's all right for you. You lived through this stellar age for humanity."

Tim Watkins (01:12:10):

I used to make the analogy that the gods of Olympus limited themselves to hopping around the islands in the Aegean. My generation of humanity got on silver tubes and flew to the other side of the planet. I mean, we didn't live like kings. We lived like gods, but it was overall too quickly and, now, comes this hangover where we've got to get used to a far less material world. I mean energy-wise, yes, we've got to work out essentially with the energy left to us. What can we actually realistically do? How do we make the best of that?

Tim Watkins (01:12:50):

I think I can point to, if you like, these mental and physical and emotional processes that stand in the way, but it's getting back to this idea that, look, we're all grownups here. We all have to make our own story. We've got to sit back, take a step back from the story we've been running and say, well, look, what actually matters in life? It isn't about having the fast car or getting the job with the highest wages.

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There is far more to life than that. Probably, the things that matter are going to come more to the fore as being what we need to do.

Nate Hagens (01:13:27):

Tim, you are a wise and kind human being, and I would like to have you back on this podcast because we never got to discuss renewable energy, the Green New Deal, Brown New Deal, what actual energy and technology combinations could fit with the seed corn that we have left of the low entropy materials, but a few closing questions just because we're about out of time. Personally, what do you care most about in the world?

Tim Watkins (01:13:59):

Family and friends. I mean, I have a deeper desire to see people not getting hurt, if you like, by their own unconscious actions. In a sense, my writing is how I tried to deal with that in my own way. I have always had a great thirst for knowledge ever since I was a kid. I was late learning to read, but, once I got the idea of reading and understood what reading was, from that point on, you couldn't get me out of books because, in those days, a hell of a lot more physically active in the daytime, so you'd go out and play rugby and run cross-country races and do all of that, but once I got home in the evening, it'd be out with the book about history or about science.

Tim Watkins (01:14:46):

I've always had that drive. I mean, okay, there's an argument that I'd have been better served by remaining unconscious and just sailing through this without thinking. I have yet to decide which would've been better, but I am where I am. I was driven to look at this, that awareness that, oh, so oil is a finite resource and we built an economy around it. That could be a problem.

Nate Hagens (01:15:13):

I tell my students that taking my class is both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing in that it's wisdom and knowledge about our future, but it's a curse because sometimes you are better off for not having learned these things because ignorance is bliss. Yet I fully believe that your efforts and people like you to educate and inspire and paint a pathway forward are the only things that we can do with our time. I appreciate all of your books, your blog, Consciousness of Sheep, and your work.

Nate Hagens (01:15:50):

Just another personal question because, if people ask me this question, I think I would answer it differently every day of the week, but what are you most worried about in the coming decade or so?

Tim Watkins (01:16:00):

Well, I mean, personally, my own mortality because I haven't got long to go. Again, you can see mortality consciously, but the whole physical, emotional response to it is much harder to get around. I

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mean, I'm certainly more reconciled to it now than I was a couple of decades ago. When you're young, you really fight against it. I got an understanding, older relatives at the end of their lives saying basically that they were almost longing for death to take the pain away. I could see that more. More broadly, the fears, there are more visceral fears now as a result of this accelerating of the process.

Tim Watkins (01:16:47):

In the UK, we had Brexit which speeded stuff up. Then we had the pandemic which speeded stuff even more. Now we've got the sanction situation that I think there are real risks of people getting hungry and far more people dying of hypothermia. I really have that concern now. Oh, yeah, and personally, there's no guarantee that anybody gets to feed me necessarily. I mean, the best I've done home growing, I grow fruit. When all else breaks down, I'll have a couple of jars of jam to get me through the winter.

Tim Watkins (01:17:23):

One of my realizations from that is there's no way that we get to feed ourselves by digging individual gardens with vegetables. I mean, it needs a collective effort if we're going to do it. Suburbia is good because it's it hasn't had the soil raped in the way that farmlands have been raped. Some of our most fertile soil is actually going to be in people's gardens, but it might be that you have to collectively get together and break down all of the fences to build a big enough piece of land that can be cultivated. Again, these community responses I think are necessary.

Tim Watkins (01:18:01):

There's an article I wrote last week talking about the way... We've had this model of food banks for feeding people where, I think, in the UK, you have to be referred by somebody like a doctor or a social worker. Basically, you haven't enough money to feed yourself, and they give you a ticket that you take along to the local food bank, and they give you a couple of bags of food. It's going to be tinned and dried food because anything else will go off. That model strikes me as being very much the old way of doing things. That's a system that's disappearing because the problem people now have is, well, you can't do anything with those tinned or dried food because you can't afford to cook them and you can't eat them raw.

Tim Watkins (01:18:45):

The other thing that struck me is, well, if everybody gets together and puts the food into one big pot, it's far easier and far more efficient to feed everyone. Possibly, what we need to look at is a return to the old community kitchens of the depression era and the war era. I mean, school dinners in the UK, at least before they privatized them, you got a nutritious meal for a very low cost because you're catering for 500 kids. We need to start learning to do that again. I've seen a few people try it where they set up... I mean, it's like a pay-what-you-want cafe model where the hope is that the better off patrons will pay for somebody else's lunch. Yeah, I enjoyed my food. Yeah, here's 20 quid, and that pays for the guy who

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is homeless or whatever to come in and have at least one decent meal a day without having to pay for it.

Tim Watkins (01:19:40):

I think that kind of community model is a much better approach going forward. Yes, I mean, I have my fear that people starve, and my hope that we learn communitarian responses to them which, for American listeners, is not the same as communism just because I know that tends to be seen as a bit of an insult now.

Nate Hagens (01:20:01):

Thank you so much, Tim, for your time and your expertise on these. Do you have any closing words of wisdom or advice or thoughts for the listeners?

Tim Watkins (01:20:12):

Only learn to be yourself. In the end, that's all any of us can do. There are things that we bring into this world that are talents that we can share with other people, to other people's benefits. Try to develop them. Try to do good in the world. We don't always succeed, but don't beat yourself up when you don't. Beating ourselves up over this stuff never works.

Nate Hagens (01:20:37):

You are being yourself on your blog, Consciousness of Sheep. Thank you so much for your time today, Tim.

Tim Watkins (01:20:44):

It's a pleasure.

Nate Hagens (01:20:45):

I hope to see you again.

Tim Watkins (01:20:46):

Yes, certainly.

Nate Hagens (01:20:48):

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