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.

(00:00:33):

Dr. Patrick Ophuls, who writes under the pen name William Ophuls, is an American political scientist, ecologist, independent scholar, author and my friend. Patrick has a PhD in political science from Yale University and he has been a prominent voice in the environmental movement since the 1970s. His award-winning book in 1977, Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity is on the bookshelves of most of my inner circle. In this movement, he has written 10 books also including Plato's Revenge, Politics in the Age of Ecology and Immoderate Greatness, why Civilizations Fail. I talked to Patrick today about his new book, the Future of Politics. This was an intense scholarly and at times grim conversation, but as he's been doing his whole life, Patrick is speaking the truth about energy, ecology and our political arrangements. Please welcome Patrick Ophuls. Hello, Patrick.

Patrick Ophuls (00:02:02):

Hello, how are you?

Nate Hagens (00:02:04):

I'm good sir. How are you?

Patrick Ophuls (00:02:06):

Well, it's getting hot here, but otherwise fine.

Nate Hagens (00:02:09):

Well, we have probably a 60 degree temperature differential between California and Wisconsin today.

Patrick Ophuls (00:02:16):

Yeah.

Nate Hagens (00:02:17):

Well it's great to see you. I think the last time I saw you was at a little soiree to discuss these issues in Switzerland and you've had more writing and thinking since, and I really wanted to highlight your lifetime of writing and thinking on the most important topic to humans and our civilization. So, thank you for spending time with me today.

Patrick Ophuls (00:02:46):

It's a pleasure.

Nate Hagens (00:02:47):

So, Patrick, you are the author of books such as Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity and Immoderate Greatness, Why Civilizations Fail. These are not household book titles, but many hedge fund managers, philanthropists and systems analysts that I know have all your books on their bookshelves. Can you start by giving us a brief overview of the core themes in these writings?

Patrick Ophuls (00:03:15):

Sure. Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity, the basic argument is that we're going from an age of ecological abundance that is the result of the conquest of the new world by Europeans that set off a wave of scientific, technical and economic forces that eventually led to the discovery of fossil fuels and the industrial revolution and the whole process going on. We are now encountering limits to that abundance and the return of scarcity. And unfortunately, all of our politics, our society economy, is all set up for abundance. So, with the return of scarcity, our system is starting to break down. It no longer works. It's premised on abundance. It can't survive an age of scarcity. We're going to revert to the historical mean. My basic argument has been my basic argument right from the start.

Nate Hagens (00:04:15):

What is the historical mean in this case?

Patrick Ophuls (00:04:18):

Let me put it this way. The historical mean is not democracy, it's not rights, it's empire, it's autocracy, it's slavery in one form or another.

Nate Hagens (00:04:32):

Well, we are going to get into that. So, you have been writing about the confluence of events that you just described for decades on the intersection of ecology and politics. Given the current media and politicians are still not having the discussion that you and I are about to have, I can say with confidence that you were ahead of your time and still are. So, how did you back in the day first become interested in all this?

Patrick Ophuls (00:05:02):

Well, I have to tell a bit of my personal story. After doing my military service, I joined the foreign service and it was not the greatest career choice for me for a lot of reasons, but it was an education that money can't buy in the way the world works. During my time in the foreign service, I got to see how politicians have all the normal faults of human beings, but with an extra dose of ideology and a lust for power. And to see that is really to despair in a way. You realize that these people running the world don't know anymore or do any better than you and they have some extra flaws in their character. So, politicians are constitutionally unable to rise above the zeitgeist or to think in long term. And that's part of our predicament right now. They can't see the future and even if they do, they can't act on it because they're stuck in zeitgeist because that's the only way they get elected office.

(00:06:09):

And as far as my concern with ecology and politics are concerned, that has a lot to do with my last diplomatic posting, which was at the embassy in Tokyo. Our apartment was maybe a half a mile away from a large television tower painted bright international orange. We almost never saw it. The smog was that bad, but on New Year's Day when traffic stops in Tokyo, you could look 50 miles away and see Mount Fuji. Then again, there was the river that runs between Tokyo and Yokohama, depending on the day of the week, it would be red or purple or yellow depending on who was doing the most polluting. Then the embassy said, don't eat the fish from Tokyo Bay. It's poisonous. Then there was the infamous Minamata of heavy metal poisoning. The pictures lit around the world of horribly contorted sons and daughters that had been poisoned in the womb.

(00:07:10):

And then the last straw was before the embassy would let you go home to Tokyo, they sent you to a hospital to have your lungs checked. The reason being that too many people that come back from four years in Tokyo with serious lung problems. So, when I went back to graduate school originally intending to become a specialist in Japanese politics or foresting diplomacy, all this ecological issue was just eating away at me. And I started to do some of my coursework with my left hand and spent the extra time reading up on it. And then finally Garrett Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons article appeared, and that's like it all coalesced and I realized I had to do my dissertation on ecology and politics even though that that was not pleasing to my elders and batteries in the Department of Political Science at Yale. So, that's how I got involved in ecology and politics.

Nate Hagens (00:08:07):

And that was in the 1960s?

Patrick Ophuls (00:08:11):

Well, my dissertation was published in 1973, but I had been working for the last four years, so since '69.

Nate Hagens (00:08:23):

So, in assembling your worldview at a young age and through your erudite career of writing and learning, are there any particular historical thinkers or historians that stand out in your understanding of our situation?

Patrick Ophuls (00:08:38):

Yeah, this is going to sound really pretentious, but it's true. Plato, Thucydides, and the Greek tragedians are primordial in my worldview, not so much from a young age, I had to have a bunch of life experience in order to make that true. Then all the other major political philosophers, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Rousseau, all of those guys are also certainly a part of it, but also a wide exposure to history. Many different epochs and cultures, Russia, China, India, the Arab world. My college major was near Eastern area Studies then supplemented by direct experience of living in various cultures, west Africa, Japan.

(00:09:32):

I worked in the Department of State out in Afghanistan. I was partly educated in Europe. Then I married a Columbian woman, so I got exposure to that culture through her. So, I guess to sum it up, I had a whole body experience, a formal education plus extensive immersion in the world. And what that has taught me is that unfortunately most people are history and culture blind. They have read very little, they have very little exposure to anything by their own narrow little world. Unfortunately, history is absolutely, in my opinion, primordial. I like what Goethe said one time. He said that, "He who knows not 3000 years is living hand to mouth." And that's fully true. And I'd add to that he who knows only their own language and culture is also living hand to mouth.

Nate Hagens (00:10:27):

I might even extend that and say he who knows not 300,000 years lives hand to mouth.

Patrick Ophuls (00:10:34):

Yes, I would agree with you there, but obviously Goethe have no knowledge of pre history in the way that we do.

Nate Hagens (00:10:42):

So, you mentioned Hobbes and Plato and Rousseau. Are humans the same now as they were when those scholars opined about the earth and there's just more of us now and more ecological damage or what do you think about that?

Patrick Ophuls (00:10:59):

No, we've been the same beings all the way up. For example, I recently read a book by Richard Overy called Blood and Ruins, a new History of World War II, and then I reread Barbara Tuchman's A Distant Mirror about the calamitous 14th century. Two very different epochs, but the same story of violence, cruelty, stupidity, atrocity, people acting exactly the same way. And everything I've read from ancient times on has said, Machiavelli says this, Rousseau says this, human nature hasn't changed. Yeah, the circumstances reflect how human nature is manifested in the world, but we're still the same beings we were 30,000 years ago.

Nate Hagens (00:11:50):

One would argue, or actually I think one meaning me does argue that energy surplus kind of makes this worse, the distraction. And in one way it empowers us because it gives us time to be able to read history and learn on the internet and from books. But on the other hand, it distracts us from the physical world that we inhabit and it gives us different signals about what matters and we will miss that subsidy when it's gone. And I wish we had something more to show for it after these last 150 years of burning ancient sunlight just for microliters of dopamine times billions of people.

Patrick Ophuls (00:12:37):

If we had acted more wisely, we could have made fossil fuels a blessing for humanity, but we acted like spend thrift heirs, we're going to take the income and have a big party.

Nate Hagens (00:12:51):

I totally agree with you, and I often wonder to myself, could we have acted more wisely? Is there anything that could have happened in the 19th century or early 20th century that would've altered our path or did we have to arrive here to witness and to understand where we came from, what we're doing, what's available to us and what we need? What do you think?

Patrick Ophuls (00:13:17):

Yeah, I think you're right. When Hobbes unleashed the passions and validated the individual, he did not realize that he was setting in course a kind of tragedy that would involve human beings in ecological destruction and in the destruction of the community that we have to live in. And we now see the consequences of that after acting out those premises over several centuries. And again, that's been the basis of my political argument all along that what Hobbs did has set us up for a tragic end.

Nate Hagens (00:13:57):

So, let's get into that. Patrick, what do you consider the top three or four most dangerous disconnects from reality on the challenges that your study of the human predicament result in?

Patrick Ophuls (00:14:14):

I think there are four of them. The first one is that we're caught in Tainter's predicament of excessive complexity. We've piled complexity on complexity to the extent that we no longer we have the energy and resources to support that complexity. As Tainter would put it, we've got negative returns on our investment in complexity. So, we can no longer afford our existence. An example is the state of US infrastructure. We can't even maintain what we got, much less build all this new infrastructure that everybody talks about. And then we, with complexity becomes a bureaucratic sclerosis. We no longer respond, and then complexity increases the risk of disaster. The pandemic, the current pandemic really illustrates how quickly, how readily failure can propagate through a complex system. I would give a shout out to Niall Ferguson's book, Doom. He's very good on how we've wrapped ourselves in so much complexity we can only respond effectively to challenges.

Nate Hagens (00:15:26):

How many books do you read a year just out of curiosity?

Patrick Ophuls (00:15:31):

Gee, I've lost count, but a lot. I go through more books than I actually read cover to cover. People recommend a book and I read it as a graduate student would say for exclusion to know that, oh, that doesn't have good information or a good argument, or I've already read that or incorporated that.

Nate Hagens (00:15:54):

I mean, if you really think about it, we're talking about a great simplification or some variation of civilization collapse, but you have been alive at the pinnacle of human energy surplus and have had

you and many other people, but you're one of the few I know that takes advantage of the erudition of the libraries of the world. You can read anything and have and I think we take for granted how much knowledge is at our fingertips, like unexpected treasure that awaits us every day when we crack open a book and there's so many supernormal stimuli distractions that keep the average human brain away from books and on their phones and their games and other things.

Patrick Ophuls (00:16:44):

Yeah, again, it's a tragedy. People are willfully ignorant and the state of education at universities doesn't bear thinking about when you see that NYU canned a professor for making organic chemistry too hard for the poor students. Well, great. You really want a surgeon who doesn't know organic chemistry. I don't think so.

Nate Hagens (00:17:12):

Well, that's a segue to my father who was a surgeon, an orthopedic surgeon, and he got C minuses in organic chemistry and he barely passed and he's like, I don't know why I had to take that, but I get your point, and I will add that my father is a few years younger than you. He's 81 and he reads two nonfiction books a week. He can't read fiction, he only reads nonfiction and he's got to drive to a further library, because all the good nonfiction books on science and ecology in the world, he's already read them. So, he has to drive to a further library. So, there are some people that are really taking advantage of it.

Patrick Ophuls (00:17:49):

Good. I read mostly non-fiction, but I too read fiction if I can find it, that tells me something about history or culture or human psychology that I don't already know. But I begin a lot of books and I don't finish them, which is an expensive habit.

Nate Hagens (00:18:08):

I suffer from something called tsundoku, which is a Japanese word. Do you know what that means?

Patrick Ophuls (00:18:13):

Yes. Where you pile up books on your shelf and never get around reading.

Nate Hagens (00:18:17):

Yeah, that's right. That's right. You buy more books than you have the time to read. Yeah. But I can short circuit that because I can have the authors of the book like you on my podcast, and then that way I learn in an hour what might take me longer to read. So, getting back to your, you said you had four categories. The first was complexity.

Patrick Ophuls (00:18:39):

And just to sum that up, we can no longer afford our existence as a civilization and only by accumulating a mountain of thermodynamic and economic debt that we've survived this far. Then the second point that I think everybody needs to understand about our current predicament is that exponential growth has caught up with us. The usual way of putting it is to say, well, we've overshot the carrying capacity or our global economic footprint is too large. But I like the idea of exponential growth better because you get a sense of something like a tsunami building up, which is threatening to overwhelm you, and we're habitually blind to the consequences of exponential growth. It's usually illustrated graphically with a single line that shoots up to eternity. But a better way of grappling it is if you have the exponential growth curves, two of them go out and all of a sudden you have this rapidly expanding cone that looks like a giant hole that threatens to devour you. If you graph it that way, you really discover the implications of exponential growth.

Nate Hagens (00:20:00):

But an economist would say that our growth is not going to be physical. We'll grow from information and we'll figure something out and we'll decouple from energy use. And if oil gets to be $300 a barrel, it won't matter because that price signal will send something and will innovate our way out of it. I mean, I know you know this.

Patrick Ophuls (00:20:22):

Well, I will just point to the issue of food. I mean, we are physical beings. We don't live on air. That alone I think would negate that kind of argument. That plus the fact that we need air, we need water, we need life support. We can't just trample on that and expect to survive.

Nate Hagens (00:20:45):

We got complexity and exponential growth.

Patrick Ophuls (00:20:48):

And I think we learned during the pandemic just how rapidly exponential growth can run through and upset everything. And we're now in that same existential predicament for the society as a whole. We're vulnerable. Another aspect of exponential growth that I think people don't realize is that each doubling represents the sum of all previous consumption or use. And so in the last 30 years or so, we've used as much fossil fuel as we used in the previous 150 years. And fossil use is still growing at about 3%, which means that roughly 25 years from now, we'll have it double that. And that's obviously simply impossible. I'm not a numbers guy, but there's a wonderful book by Vaclav Smil, How the World Really Works. He's a super numbers guy and he will convince you that net zero by 2050 is a pathetic fantasy. To achieve a smooth transition to anything like a livable world, we would've had to started maybe five decades ago. Now that we didn't we're too late.

(00:22:03):

Then the third point is that at this point in our existence, we're trapped in a classic double bind. On the one hand, the scientists say, we have got to reduce our usage of fossil fuel energy by 2030 to stay

within 1.5 degrees centigrade, but we've got to keep the lights on and keep the economy going with fossil fuel while we try and build this new wonderful electrical infrastructure. But unfortunately, you can't bootstrap that culture. In order to build it, you're going to have to use fossil fuel and actually quite a lot of it. And then because we're building it in the way that we're doing with solar panels and that kind of thing, we're still going to need fossil fuels to maintain it in the future.

(00:22:53):

So, unless we come up with a really radically new and different kind of technology trapped in a double bind where we can't quit fossil fuel in the short term, and the overall point is that increased fossil fuel use is locked in for the foreseeable future, meaning we'll inevitably exceed our budget and we'll go to at least two degrees and probably more, and that two degrees will be bad enough, but it'll be amplified. And a recent scientific paper said that amplification in the Arctic can be up to eight times the mean global temperature. And that's a really scary thought.

Nate Hagens (00:23:39):

Okay. Complexity, exponential growth, the double bind. And you said that you had four.

Patrick Ophuls (00:23:46):

Yeah, I've got the last one, and this is the previous ones are on the biophysical scale. This one is a purely political one, a classical political, social economic dilemma, and in my opinion will be the real killer. If we were to move rapidly to a decarbonized world, we would overturn the economy, the society and the policy that's just not prepared for that kind of radical change. But moving slowly will produce some form of climate catastrophe, conditions worse than we experienced now. President Xi of China made the dilemma explicit in a talk to a bunch of party fubas. He said China will move to decarbonize as rapidly as possible, but we will not allow it to interfere with "normal life". But normal life is exactly what has to change. And so if you don't interfere with normal life, you're just going to continue on until you're done.

Nate Hagens (00:24:51):

Well, I think the other interesting thing about China, I hope we have a little bit of time to talk about your second most recent book, Electrifying the Titanic. I think renewables in tandem with depleting fossil fuels could power a civilization just not this one. But I find it very interesting that everyone's talking about how cheap renewables are and 95% of the components and solar panels and wafers and turbines and everything are made in China with coal and gas powered factories. So, if they were that cheap, why wouldn't China be using solar and wind to create the solar and wind panels, which is something that we don't really think about.

Patrick Ophuls (00:25:35):

Okay. Yeah, I agree with you entirely. Listen, the overall thing is we're running into a box can and the only solution to getting out of a box can is to turn around and go the other way. But we won't do it voluntarily. We'll have to be dragged kicking and screaming. But unfortunately, all our established institutions and individuals, both ferociously resist change. And so when the necessary changes are

forced on the population, either by politicians or by ecological necessity, there's going to be anger and loss aversion on steroids.

Nate Hagens (00:26:18):

It almost seems like it's a cultural motivated reasoning situation that as individuals, when we hear something that disagrees with our identity, we dig our heels in and we believe our thing stronger. And maybe the type of story that you're unpacking here with complexity, exponential growth, double bind is so threatening to the cultural belief systems that it is actively rejected and ignored until it can no longer be. And maybe we're getting closer to that moment.

Patrick Ophuls (00:26:50):

Yeah. I'm going to take the concrete example of the automobile. The automobile, the primary automobile is an ecological disaster, probably the greatest mass to spoiler resources and human welfare on the planet, both directly and indirectly. But if governments were to try to force people out of their cars by taxes, fees, or fiat, they're going to react like Charleston Heston, you will pry this gun out of my cold, dead hands. That will be the reaction. And politicians would be besieged by pedestrian peasants. And if rich people continue to drive, they're going to get a brick through their windshield. It will come to that because the automobile is so central now to people's identity and welfare for good or for ill that to take it away is going to unleash a revolution. Unfortunately, we're not going to bite the ecological bullet. We're going to keep the automobile running, we're going to do in our batteries, and that's what I call Electrifying the Titanic. You keep on doing the stupid and foolish thing that you were doing, but you put a battery in it and then it's okay. Sorry, that's not going to work.

Nate Hagens (00:28:10):

Yeah, I think a lot of my work, what you know is talking about energy blindness and even if we did have the energy available to continue to grow, we also have material limits and batteries are starting to make people more aware of lithium and copper in the infrastructure and other things that we can't just extrapolate today's price times a hundred or a thousand in the future. There are biophysical limits on material flows as well.

Patrick Ophuls (00:28:42):

Yeah, we're in an ecological hole instead of trying to get out of it, we just keep digging it deeper.

Nate Hagens (00:28:49):

So, with that backdrop, Patrick, what does the future look like? What kind of future can we expect as a consequence of these four challenges you've outlined?

Patrick Ophuls (00:29:02):

Okay. I'm going to put on my hat as a history doctor and examine the patient here, which is our current civilization. And I would have to say the prognosis is grim. We're caught in what the French call a problématique, which is a nexus of interlocking problems with mutually incompatible solutions. And as

bad as that is in its own right, the real problem is that we lack the capacity to deal with it. Our mental emotional nature is just not adequate to the nature of the problem. Our institution's ideologies are inadequate for the nature of the problem. I will give a shout out to Donella Meadows in her book Thinking In Systems. I think everybody should read that book, because it really lays bare the understanding of how systems work. And her point is that complex adaptive systems are not manageable or controllable by human beings who have linear minds.

(00:30:04):

So, we're really stuck then with a problem we can't solve. That plus the political impossibility of saying no to a high throughput, all modern conveniences society. Last but not least, there's the grip of extremely wealthy and powerful vested interest with the fossil fuel industry first and foremost. So, we'll practice business as usual. Instead of solving the problem, we'll do boondock all, so like electrifying the Titanic. Apart from that, we have to deal with geopolitics as a reality. That's going to take bandwidth away from people who have to make these decisions.

(00:30:46):

Plus blowing up a lot of fossil fuel on the battlefield. And along with that, we'll do our utmost to live a kind of normal life by electrifying the Titanic until at some point we're overtaken by events. So, it's too late to make a smooth or managed transition. We will eventually enter a time of troubles, a time of breakdown, chaos, loss, probably cruelty and violence, in short, a kind of barbarism. And contemporary politics and culture foreshadow that, in my opinion, increasingly selfish behavior, significant moral decline, all signs telling me that history leads to decline in fall. Politics is a blood sport. Again, another sign of collapse.

Nate Hagens (00:31:36):

Dick Gephart was my first podcast guest on this series and is a good friend of mine, and he often says that politics is a substitute for violence. What do you think about that quote?

Patrick Ophuls (00:31:48):

Yes. Well, that's absolutely true. Or some people say politics is a sublimated civil war is another way of saying that. And when a good politics works, it does sublimate it. But when the sublimation starts to break down, then the intrinsic violence starts to come to the surface. And that's what I see happening.

Nate Hagens (00:32:09):

So, you're a lifelong scholar on this. Can you just define for me what you mean when you use the word politics?

Patrick Ophuls (00:32:16):

Okay. It's not politicking, it's not electoral politics. The politics that you find in Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau and so on, the basic rules that govern the social border, that's politics in its truest sense. Everything else is politicking.

Nate Hagens (00:32:35):

Got it. So, you have recently written a manuscript, the Tragedy of Industrial Civilization and the Future of Politics. What new ground do you tread with this book, Patrick? I'm somewhat afraid to ask.

Patrick Ophuls (00:32:50):

Well, that we're enacting a tragedy, and I think I've already touched on this. Tragedy isn't something bad. A airplane crash or child's death, that's sad, but it's not a tragedy. Tragedy is when there's a true understanding or a better course of action, but the protagonist doesn't see it. So, they continue on blindly on a course that will produce a bad outcome. They don't see it until too late to prevent the downfall. So, we humans thought we could conquer nature, but we've lost the war and are going to suffer the consequences. We also thought that by following Hobbes' philosophical premises, that we would be making a good life for ourselves through "economic development".

(00:33:40):

But we've instead created a kind of Hobbesian nightmare in which our lives have become or soon will become increasingly solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Hobbes' words for the state of nature. We're going back to a state of nature. We could save ourselves and create a decent civilization, even at this late hour. It's what I call an Apollonian civilization. Civilization based on moderation, balanced rationality in the good sense, and this is certainly my hope, that we will come through a relatively brief time of troubles, come to our senses and embrace a culture of simplicity with the politics and match, which is what I spell out in the manuscript. My fear is of course, that we'll simply let the tragedy play out and take the consequences.

Nate Hagens (00:34:33):

The biophysical story that we face. If we could somehow freeze 8 billion humans in stasis and figure out what is our natural resource and environmental source and sync balance sheet, we actually could navigate away through this century. But it's the human hubris and distractability and politics and tribal nature. That's the real challenge that we face.

Patrick Ophuls (00:35:03):

And then the ideology that we've embraced that we refuse to give up. Yeah, exactly.

Nate Hagens (00:35:08):

Yeah. Regarding politics. Democracy, along with freedom, et cetera, have become a part of this sacred lexicon of our contemporary universal religion along with economic growth and the future's going to be bright, et cetera. And if we talk about some of the things that you're saying, it's akin to social blasphemy, but you do talk about it. So, how does democracy fit in with biophysical limits to growth? Can we maintain open societies on the down slope?

Patrick Ophuls (00:35:46):

Well, okay, let me start by saying that in my manuscript, I agree that we made democracy into a fetish. And we have a mass democracy, and if you examine mass democracy in the light of the political theorists who support democracy, you would realize that our democracy is really a kind of sham. It's bound to produce suboptimal outcomes and eventually a disastrous one. I think we also need to make a note that democracies, we understand it is historical exception. My argument, ecology and politics of scarcity, that liberal democracy is the outcome part of the luxury and fruit of this era of ecological abundance. And while now that that abundance is going away, our style of liberal democracy is going to go away. It's not that you can't have civil rights, the Romans had civil rights, but without the support of fossil fuel, our style of mass democracy and mass consumption and so on is simply unworkable.

(00:36:58):

In one of my books that we haven't mentioned so far called Platos Revenge, I try and lay down the philosophical basis for an ecological way of life based on grounded on ecology, psychology, and political philosophy. And in that, I set up a utopia that I call Bali with sophisticated electronics, a kind of civilization based on horticultural agriculture, where the culture is very strong, there's a strong community sense that has deep spiritual values and so on. That is a possibility for humanity. But we've got to desire to head in that direction. And so far we haven't.

Nate Hagens (00:37:46):

So, on that note, is technology part of the solution or part of the problem? Is there a role for things getting more efficient over time in the context of the civilization decline that you expect? Does ingenuity even matter in the larger scheme of things?

Patrick Ophuls (00:38:04):

Yeah, I think it does matter. There's always a room for more efficiency or better mouse traps. But the problem is that we need a new way of being civilized or we're not going to be a civilization much longer. You have to ask ingenuity to what end. Is it more wealth and power, more consumption than destructive force? If we tame technology, if for example, I mentioned Bali with electronics, there's nothing wrong with electronics, but if those electronics fit in to a stable, healthy, grounded society, that's one thing. But if it's just unhinged the way it is now where somebody like Mark Zuckerberg boast about, I'm going to break things. Okay, yeah. Well you broke it. Thank you.

Nate Hagens (00:38:56):

Dennis Meadows was on this podcast earlier this year, and he said, if someone's coming at you with a hammer, changing the tool, changing the technology doesn't change the intent of who's coming at you. And so unless we change the cultural aspirations and maybe the cultural consciousness, technology itself is just a tool towards more growth and more ecological destruction as it is now.

Patrick Ophuls (00:39:21):

Exactly. Yeah. I think we're, the problem is, and we'll get into this a little more when we come to the Illich quotation, but we're enthralled by a technological machine that is bound for self destruction. And unless we change our ways, we'll just be slaves to the machine until it breaks down.

Nate Hagens (00:39:44):

So, like most of your writing, Patrick, pretty much every paragraph is quotable. And I've written down several quotes and I would like to read one from your new manuscript, but just before I ask you that. Do you just have some tea and a dark chocolate and riff out these paragraphs, because your books are biophysically cogent and very erudite, but they read like poetry, and this is not me saying this, a lot of people have said this. How do you write these? In one sitting? Or do you hone them like Samurai swords?

Patrick Ophuls (00:40:21):

I revise extensively. I'm not too bad about getting down a first draft. Some people have really struggle with that. But in part, my training in the foreign service taught me how to write quickly and cogently, because you don't have a lot of time. And when I wrote my dissertation, I just poured the notes through the typewriter. I mean, I made no attempt to make into a really readable book. But ever since then, I've approached writing as a craft and I regard the first draft as this big piece of marble, which I now have to sculpt into a shape that is pleasing in every sense of the word.

(00:41:03):

But more important, I think of writing a book of the kind that I do, it's like you're guiding somebody up a cliff. You have to holds there that they can make it all the way to the top. You have to show them the route, and the route has to be convincing. And what you discover when you write is that you go up to the wrong crack and you realize, oh, this is going to lead to the top. So, you backtrack and you go up in the other direction. That's kind of how I approach writing.

Nate Hagens (00:41:36):

But in your case, you take those holes up the cliff and then you get to the top of the cliff and jump off it.

Patrick Ophuls (00:41:43):

No, no. I mean, then you walk quietly down and your life should be changed.

Nate Hagens (00:41:47):

Exactly. Well, that's how I felt with your books. I think I have all of them to my knowledge. So, here's a quote from your latest manuscript. "Words like civility, self-restraint, duty, honor, responsibility, and sacrifice have lost most of their meaning or are even derided, but they will have to be resurrected. The fundamental teaching of ecology and a core spiritual truth is that we are all deeply intimately interrelated. Our politics must reflect that unelectable fact." Can you expand on this?

Patrick Ophuls (00:42:27):

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. The fundamental argument of the book is that we're enacting a tragedy because we forgot that we live in both a human and a natural community whose interests and needs have to be served because to behave otherwise will lead to eventual self destruction. To give a longer answer might

require a fairly long excursion into political philosophy. But the essence is that modern politics, following Hobbes all about individual wants and rights. And so the community, over time, the community and its associated values get short shrift. We've been living off the fossil virtue of a Christian civilization that preceded modern times and has gradually eroded away.

Nate Hagens (00:43:17):

Wait, we've been living off the fossil virtue of a Christian civilization.

Patrick Ophuls (00:43:22):

Yes.

Nate Hagens (00:43:23):

Oh, I thought you would've said the Christian virtue of a fossil civilization.

Patrick Ophuls (00:43:27):

Well, no, it's the other way around that when Hobbes and Locke together unleashed the passions and made modern politics, Locke depended on a strong civil society. But what he didn't realize is that it was subject to erosion over time. Both Hobbes and Locke, they said get religion out of politics, but they didn't mean to get religion out of life. They assumed that people would continue to go to church and behave like good Christians. And that community values would continue to cohere and people would be honorable instead of just looking out for number one. But they didn't realize that virtue can be eroded. So, we've spent the fossil virtue of Christianity and now it's every man, woman for him or herself, selfishness rules. So, that's slowly destroying both the natural and the human community.

Nate Hagens (00:44:27):

So, where is the world, the arc of civilization decline? Are there ways of measuring this metrics or signposts that you look at? Or will everything just kind of on the surface be generally okay until it's not?

Patrick Ophuls (00:44:41):

Yeah, well, of course I don't have a crystal ball, so I can't say for sure. And I don't think there are very clear metrics or signposts, but I will note that both ecological systems and sociopolitical systems are flickering. And what I mean by that is they're showing increasing signs of stress, if not distress, such as more extreme behavior. And I also note that that scientists keep coming up with new studies saying it's happening faster and it's going to be worse than we thought. Those are little trend lines that tell me we're going in a bad direction, but when exactly the stress level reaches the point where the radical system change or outright collapsed happens, that's unpredictable. And the models can't really tell us.

Nate Hagens (00:45:34):

Well two things. First of all, collapse has already happened for Ukraine, Syria, Bangladesh, Madagascar, and other places. The second comment I would make is if politicians listen to the

scientists, as you were just saying, that brings us to that double bind, because to do the right thing for ecology and the environment is going to be the wrong thing for our current lifestyles, convenience, comforts, and political system and vice versa.

Patrick Ophuls (00:46:03):

And that's why I say we are enacting a tragedy. We are caught in these dilemmas and double binds and we're caught in wrong use. And there's no easy way out from that. I will go out on a limb here with saying that just personally I do expect significant worsening in this decade and even worse, much worse in the next decade of the thirties. Just a gut feeling.

Nate Hagens (00:46:33):

Yeah. Well, I don't necessarily disagree with you, which is why I'm sending this internet beacon through the wilderness, as it were. So, you mentioned Ivan Illich. I didn't know that you knew him, but in the preface to your new book, you have the following quote from Ivan Illich. "The energy crisis focuses concern on the scarcity of fodder for these energy slaves. I prefer to ask whether free men need them. A low energy policy allows for a wide choice of lifestyles and cultures. If on the other hand, a society ops for high energy consumption, its social relations must be dictated by technocracy and will be equally degrading, whether labeled to capitalist or socialist." And that's from the book Energy and Equity.

Patrick Ophuls (00:47:30):

Yes. Our lives are increasingly subject to industrial complexes of every description. Not just the military industrial complex, but there's an education industrial complex, a medical industrial complex, and so on throughout all of our lives. So, technology has begun to dictate our existence. If you look just at what TV and digital media have done to our political, social, and economic life, that alone, I would say, and I guess I've already said, that our lives are heading in a bad direction. We're not only committing ecological suicide, but our lives have become increasingly or will become increasingly solitairy, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. That's the direction we're heading with a time of troubles and chaos and violence and cruelty and acting out and scapegoating and everything that can go wrong in history. That's an extreme statement. But reality increasingly resembles the state of nature.

Nate Hagens (00:48:35):

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you are approaching your 90th year on this earth. How long have you felt that intuition or the certainty of what you just described about our future and how have you managed to maintain your equanimity and grace and everything else knowing this and carrying it with you for decades, I presume?

Patrick Ophuls (00:49:00):

Yeah. Well, I am 88 and getting on in years for sure. And when I first encountered the ecological problématique when I was in graduate school, there were moments when I gave into despair, I couldn't see any way out. I mean, I'd see that human beings just weren't smart enough basically to get out of the fix that they were in. But some previous experience in life, partly the foreign service, but partly personal

events, death in the family, that kind of thing had already moved me toward a mature, semi-mature understanding of that I would call the tragic sense of life.

(00:49:50):

And then later, and this was after I had already published ecology of the politics of scarcity, I encountered Buddhism and followed the path of intensity of meditation and this amplified and completed my sense of the tragedy of life, the intrinsic tragedy of life. I don't want to push Buddhism here, but I will just say that the Buddhist first noble truth is that Dukkha exists. Dukkha meaning essentially intrinsic pain and difficulty and problem of human life, that there's no way around and there's no political or economic or social cure for that. It's intrinsic to life. But as I say, I'm not pushing Buddhism or meditation. There are many paths, everybody needs to find their own.

Nate Hagens (00:50:43):

Well, if you were pushing it, you wouldn't be the first on this podcast. I've had several, probably five or six people that have mentioned it.

Patrick Ophuls (00:50:51):

Yeah, well, here's the thing. Mindfulness can benefit anybody. Intensive meditation is not for everybody. I just want, that's a caveat I want to put out there.

Nate Hagens (00:51:03):

Well, how do you define that? What is mindfulness?

Patrick Ophuls (00:51:06):

Mindfulness is simply paying attention, being undistracted.

Nate Hagens (00:51:10):

And how does that differ from meditation?

Patrick Ophuls (00:51:13):

With mindfulness, you can go to have a course in mindfulness, paying attention. If you go on a meditation retreat, you're going to do that all day, eight hours of sitting, eight hours of walking. It's a very intense experience.

Nate Hagens (00:51:30):

So, we've talked about this before and I've been quite amazed at some of your life experiences on this. You have been meditating for 50 years or so, and then you've also told me that you've gone places and didn't speak for a month or even longer. Can you talk, I've always been fascinated when you recount this to me.

Patrick Ophuls (00:51:54):

Well, that's what happens if you do an intensive meditation retreat, whether it's a week or 10 days or three months, you spend all day doing a formal meditation practice, paying attention in spades, whether sitting on a cushion or doing walking meditation or eating your meal. And as part of that, you separate yourself from the world, you separate yourself from social contact and you just focus on your inner world. And then it begins to unfold.

Nate Hagens (00:52:27):

I think I may have mentioned this to you, but I can't recall. Four or five years ago I did a three day in Sebastopol, California, three day quiet retreat with a friend of mine and there were 10 other people in the dojo. And from 5:30 in the morning to eight at night, we were there together, no talking, meditating, chanting. And on the second night, and the third night I slept like I had not slept my entire life. We had no coffee, no alcohol, no technology, no emails, nothing. And it was like my brain was pure white snow and it was amazing. And despite the benefits and how awesome I felt, I've still not done that. I've not repeated it because I'm so freaking busy and I'm so worried about the future and want to shift the Titanic a few degrees. How were you able to develop a practice over time? And for anyone possibly listening to this that's interested, do you have any advice for them or for me for that matter?

Patrick Ophuls (00:53:40):

Yeah, again, I'm very, very reluctant to give personal advice in this area. I'm not trained as a teacher and I don't want to be a teacher. I had other fish to fry in this lifetime. Everybody needs to find their own path. If something in what we've said rings a bell in the listener, that will lead them somehow, I wouldn't say automatically, but somehow mystically almost to a situation or a teacher or a person or something that will satisfy that urge.

Nate Hagens (00:54:17):

So, every morning, not to just focus on my own routine, but that's the only one that I know. Every morning I take the dogs for a walk in the woods without my phone, and in the summer and in the spring and autumn, if it's warm enough, I'll do a bike ride. And I just think for an hour and a half and I just sit there and think, and I'm kind of lost in the scenery and there's rivers and forests here and it's just so stunningly beautiful. Would that be considered meditation or not really?

Patrick Ophuls (00:54:48):

Well, yes. Yeah, the Japanese have a whole tradition of as you know forest bathing and that kind of thing.

Nate Hagens (00:54:54):

Forest bathing, yeah, shinrin-yoku.

Patrick Ophuls (00:54:56):

As a way to get us out of our habitual neurosis into something saner, which is nature. So, yes, but that's not formal meditation. No. It's a good practice. It's why I walk in nature.

Nate Hagens (00:55:14):

Yeah. I just wonder if we talk about education and the Davos World economic forum and classes, I just wonder if the whole world could slow down and do a day or three of meditation and a better able to observe and reflect and just take a time out from all this technology and supernormal stimuli. That itself would allow us to grasp the roots of maybe what we're capable of and seeing the footholds in the cliff that writers like you are trying to tell us.

Patrick Ophuls (00:55:55):

Yeah. Well, Nate, you've just described the justification for the Sabbath. That's what everybody was supposed to do is once a week they put aside all their worldly concerns and cares and they go worship in community. That brief exit from our normal, busy, crazy life was supposed to keep us on track. But now as I say, that's part of the fossil virtue that is eroded away. And so people are on board spiritually.

Nate Hagens (00:56:23):

Well now we have three different football games to choose from, early afternoon, late afternoon, and evening on Sundays.

Patrick Ophuls (00:56:31):

Well, and we got the World series too.

Nate Hagens (00:56:36):

So, I ask these questions to all of my guests, Patrick, I hope you don't mind, but given your lifetime of your addition and reflection, do you have any personal advice to the listeners of this podcast at this time of global poly crisis?

Patrick Ophuls (00:56:56):

I guess the honest answer is that no, I don't. If listeners can derive any benefit or wisdom from whatever we've said in this podcast, that would be wonderful. But I'm not sure I even know how to prepare my own grandchildren for what is coming.

Nate Hagens (00:57:12):

You wrote a book for them, didn't you?

Patrick Ophuls (00:57:15):

Yeah, but it wasn't really advice to, it was apologizing for the sack of shit where we're about to end. At any rate, I think we're in a very peculiar predicament here, somewhat similar to the people who lived in Paris at the time of the first meeting of the states general in 1789. Once the revolution happened, it was so self-keep and you survived as best you could. There's no playbook for a time of troubles. But if you were to read the two books I mentioned before by Overy and Tuchman, as well as Simon Schama's book

on the French Revolution, you would get a taste of what life is like when the Ancien Régime collapses and you enter a time of troubles.

Nate Hagens (00:58:07):

We'll put those links in the show notes. If you were a benevolent dictator and there was no personal recourse to your decision, what is one thing that you would recommend or one thing that you would do to improve human and planetary futures?

Patrick Ophuls (00:58:25):

It's a great question, but sorry, there's no one thing you could do. In my opinion, the problem is so large and so much has to change. Human beings are so incompetent, recalcitrant and resistant. And it's not like changing the course of a super tank. There's no help. There are instead multiple levers that have to be pushed in just the right direction at just the right time, in synchrony with all the other levers that have to be pushed. So, it's an almost impossible task in a way. And physical measures like bicycle speed limit are therefore not the real answer. In the end the change that we require is moral.

(00:59:11):

We require metanoia fundamental change in our worldview to accord with biophysical and, so I believe, spiritual reality. So, in that light, to answer your question, I might have everybody spend one year on a meditation cushion. I'm undercutting my own advice here. It's not for everybody, but you get the idea that maybe they'd come out of it seeing their own life and life in general in a new light, they would see how wonderful and precious life is. So, why living a way that's self destructive, destroys nature, damages your soul. That will never happen, by the way.

Nate Hagens (00:59:52):

Well, I mean, I think it's asking that question to my various guests creates an overton window of imagining what is the direction that we could go, and maybe some people listening to this will start to look into mindfulness or meditation. I know that I have strong intents in that direction. I'm just working 60 or 70 hour weeks right now, and I need to have a little bit more balance. And other than the things I mentioned, I would like to meditate more. So, thank you for this reminder again. So, you wrote a book, Apologies to the Grandchildren. What specific recommendations do you have for young humans who become aware of the story you are telling of energy, climate, biophysical constraints to the human enterprise and you have your own grandchildren?

Patrick Ophuls (01:00:43):

Yeah, I guess the essence of the advice would be to escape from the cultural trans wake up to reality. That of course is very hard for many reasons. Among them, the education system is not designed to wake you up. It's designed to prepare you to be canon fodder for the industrial army. In the manuscript of my new book, I talk a bit about what a proper education would be like, but even if young people have inklings that all does not well. Escaping from the zeitgeist is very hard. Youngsters who are aware of the future can do some practical things, however, to prepare themselves.

(01:01:23):

And the first and foremost one I would mention is study of martial art. Get a black belt in martial art, learn how to take care of yourself physically. You may need that skill and then learn a trade. Learn how to do something useful by which you can support yourself. Preparing to become part of the cognitive elite I think is not a good path for a thriving future for somebody who's young today. And then along the same lines of meditation, spend some time on a meditation cushion, develop some inner strength. So, youngsters should develop both inner and outer resources to confront a time when things may go haywire.

Nate Hagens (01:02:07):

Thank you for that. Patrick, what do you care most about in the world?

Patrick Ophuls (01:02:12):

Well, obviously I care most about the fate of the grandchildren. As I say, we're doing them to really bad circumstances and we're leaving them an utterly degraded and dangerous world. And then also the fate of all the animals, the tigers, the elephants. I mean, we're just killing off creation.

Nate Hagens (01:02:35):

I agree. So, of all the issues that we've spoken about today and others, what are you most concerned about specifically in the next 10 years or so in our world?

Patrick Ophuls (01:02:46):

Well, I guess politically I'm concerned that the time of troubles may be coming upon us sooner rather than later. That the unraveling of industrial civilization could happen relatively soon. Ecologically, I'm very concerned about the Arctic. Arctic amplification is worse than we thought, and if we get an open arctic in August, September, that could really be sent off a cascade of tipping points, particularly the accelerated melting of permafrost with associated methane release and other consequences. But that would be bad enough. I also worry a lot about and feel really sad about, as I indicated, precipitous decline in biodiversity. I mean, we're killing off creation and accelerating pace and that's going to have consequences for us as well as them.

Nate Hagens (01:03:45):

I'm encouraged that at least that is now getting in the media, the 70% loss from the living planet index is all over the news this week. And at least people are starting to recognize it. And I feel that deep down, a lot of humans do feel kinship with the natural world, and hopefully we will incorporate the natural world into future decisions. But this also gets back to politics. The tigers and the elephants and the bees and the fish and the dolphins don't sit in our political chambers or on our corporate boardrooms.

Patrick Ophuls (01:04:23):

They don't have a vote.

Nate Hagens (01:04:25):

Yeah. So, in contrast, what are you most hopeful about in the coming decade or so?

Patrick Ophuls (01:04:31):

If you want a conventional sign of hope, it would be French president Macron's admission that the age of abundance is over. I mean, I think it's really good news. The bad news can be articulated by a president instead of a Swedish school girl.

Nate Hagens (01:04:48):

Did you see last week that the French Prime Minister said, we've entered the age of energy sobriety and she's encouraging French citizens to use 10% less energy and gave a list of options? I can't imagine that in the United States. I just can't imagine a politician saying that.

Patrick Ophuls (01:05:06):

No, no. They would be laughed off the stage. That's partly due to what's happening in Ukraine.

Nate Hagens (01:05:11):

Of course.

Patrick Ophuls (01:05:12):

All out from that.

Nate Hagens (01:05:13):

I think it's also partially due to the French have this thing called collapsology, which is like this theme that's been going on for a decade. And some of the authors of this have talked to Macron, and so there is this, what I refer to as advanced policy, which is educating leaders about what's going to have to happen in the future. So, maybe France is ahead of the us on that a little bit.

Patrick Ophuls (01:05:39):

I think you're probably right. Then let's see, for the sake of the grandchildren, I certainly hope that we'll survive the time of troubles in good enough shape so that neoagrarian society of the kind that I spell out in Bali with Electronics can be possible. It isn't such a disaster that we can't recover from it. But I don't really have hope in the conventional sense, because as I said earlier, I came to the tragic sense of life fairly early in life and understanding that human beings, who they are, they're aristic, they're foolish, they're fallible, and life being what it is, it's a complex adaptive system that as Donella Meadows said, that we cannot hope to master, then things are always going to go awry in the long term. The Greeks understood this and they of course personified it in the form of Gods who were inscrutable and tyrannical, but we're really faced with the same situation as the Greeks were.

(01:06:45):

We have it in a more scientific form, but we're learning. We don't control the cosmos. We're not in charge. Nature is, and if we do things to it that nature doesn't like, it's going to bite back. Simple as that. I know they're going to be brief eras like in France, Les Trente Glorieuses after the war, or Fukuyama, the brief end of history. But then you have the reversion to the mean, the historical mean. Now, when I say that I have a tragic sense of life, that doesn't mean that I give up or that I don't experience the beauty of the world and the meaningfulness of life.

(01:07:31):

In fact, our lives do have a deep purpose, but one that can't really be defined because it's up to each individual to find that for him or herself. There's no one path toward that end. But having embraced the tragedy, you could also see the comedy. You can have a good laugh really at the folly of human, "Oh Lord, what fools these mortals be". And I'd like to end with a wonderful poem, a brief quote from a wonderful poem, poem's called A Brief for the Defense by Jack Gilbert. And here's an excerpt. "We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight, not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude."

Nate Hagens (01:08:32):

Thank you so much for your time today, and thank you for your lifetime of scholarship and trying to articulate our plight in your books, in your writings. I'm so glad our paths crossed Patrick and to be continued. Thank you so much.

Patrick Ophuls (01:08:47):

Thank you for the opportunity, Nate, and keep up the good work. You're doing a great job of informing people of the things they really need to know.

Nate Hagens (01:08:57):

Thanks, Patrick. If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of the Great Simplification, please subscribe to us on your favorite podcast platform and visit thegreatsimplification.com for more information on future releases.