

# The Great Simplification

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Nate Hagens (00:00:00):

Welcome to another episode of The Great Simplification. This is a new direction. Joining me today is Daniel Zetah, who lives close to me just west of Minneapolis, where he and his wife Stephanie, work on a family farm where they grow 80% of their own calories, rebuilding the local ecology, the soil, and providing education to young humans. Daniel grew up in Minnesota, but then traveled around the world studying economics, business. He lived abroad for 15 years where he sold and bought classic cars, was a snake relocater and scatologist, which I didn't get to ask him about, as well as chemical spraying auditor in Tasmania.

(00:00:46):

After waking to our planetary predicament, he became a full-time environmental activist and eventually spent time with the Amish off-grid community, and he moved back to the United States with an effort to go all in on helping steer culture towards a more sustainable, desirable path. This conversation had a wide range from animal agriculture to meditation, to killing animals that you raise for food to a reality lens of the future. He's kind of a farmer MacGyver mix, wonderful man who is going to make a difference, and he's bucking the trend with big ag being surrounded by it in the Midwest. And I hope you find this conversation with Daniel Zetah interesting, helpful, and spurs your imagination. Please welcome Daniel Zeta.

(00:02:00):

Daniel, great to see you.

Daniel Zetah (00:02:01):

Good day, Nate, how are you?

Nate Hagens (00:02:04):

I am well. You are the closest podcast guest I think I've ever had. You're about an hour drive from me in Minnesota, and I don't have any questions planned for you. You and I have had one conversation and I just got back from a bike ride and I was thinking about it, and if I wasn't blessed and cursed with the knowledge and network and anxiety about the future that I currently have, I would be living your life. So hopefully we can talk about your path, what you're doing on your farm in Minnesota.

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And maybe the way that I think of this, Daniel, is the first year of my podcast is mostly guests that describe what's going on with oceans, the environment, our society, our behavior, our energy. But over time, I want to have more guests like yourself that are applying these things and living a life under the umbrella of systemic awareness of our predicament. So you're one of the first of these type of guests, and I hope to have more. So I hope that's not too tall of an order, but welcome to the show and maybe you could introduce yourself, a brief history of what got you to having a farm in Minnesota and following my podcast.

Daniel Zetah (00:03:37):

Well, thanks for inviting me to do this. I'm really excited to be here because I have listened to a lot of your podcasts and a lot of, like you said, it's very academic, a lot of it is very academic, and I want to see more people actually doing this, but I totally understand what you're saying is when you're actually talking about it and you're a specialist, you don't have the time to do this. So my name's Daniel Zetah. I grew up on this farm. That's how I came to be on this farm. I didn't think anything of it at the time when I was young, but it was kind of a special farm. The fact that we raised mostly grass-fed beef and hay, so we didn't have commodity crops, we didn't spray any chemicals, we didn't add any fertilizer. It was all very, very natural.

(00:04:26):

So I went to college, went to school for economics and business, ended up in Colorado, buying and selling classic cars for a year or two, and moved to Australia after 9/11 happened because I wasn't too keen on the American culture to begin with. But then when that happened, and it just went more into fear mode, I decided to get out and ended up spending a dozen years in Tasmania. While I was there, I found permaculture, ended up in a little village called Lorinna, up in the mountains of Tasmania for a few years, building straw bale houses with a Canadian fella named Lance there. And I just started getting more and more into this. And then after getting more into this, more activism, I did a lot of activism. I was on an empty whaling ship. I was arrested for pipelines and yada, yada yada. I realized that no matter, no matter where I went in the world, we were all trying desperately, everybody's throwing their thousands of year old culture under the bus just trying desperately to be like Americans. They just want to live like we do. And everywhere I went in the world, I'm like, don't do it. It's a trap. Nobody's happy here. We're

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miserable. So I realized that there's really nothing I could do other than to go back to the belly of the beast, which is come back to the farm because I'm surrounded by corn and soy and big ag and a lot of great people, but a lot of unconsciousness. Nobody really seems to give a rat's about the environments or the ecology or biodiversity or climate change. And so I came back here hoping to steer culture in a more sane direction and live a more sovereign life in doing so. So here I am.

Nate Hagens (00:06:21):

Wow. Well, other than the Canadian named Lance, that's a common history for a lot of people. No, I'm kidding. That's quite a story. So what are you doing now? Well, what did you do today? It's three o'clock. What have you done so far? Just a whirlwind summary of your activities I think would be interesting.

Daniel Zetah (00:06:45):

Well, I got up, I had breakfast. I checked on our cows because they're all very close to calving. And then I went to building because we're building a student accommodation building on the farm right now out of a bunch of reclaimed materials, and we're putting up the floor joists so we can get this flooring on and get the second story framing started this week. So I'm hoping to get the roof on the second story by the end of the week.

Nate Hagens (00:07:14):

So the old phrase, you're a gentleman scholar, the new phrase is you're an ecologist farmer.

Daniel Zetah (00:07:22):

I would take that. Yeah. So I'm-

Nate Hagens (00:07:27):

So tell me about your farm, you and your wife and your family.

Daniel Zetah (00:07:32):

Okay, so my parents still live in the house, the main house. They're 86 years old this year, and my wife, her name is Stephanie. She's from Missouri originally. I met her in North Carolina at an earth haven eco village of all places where she was farming on

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a Buddhist goat farm. And invited her up here. She said, no, Minnesota's not a part of my life path. And I kind laughed, but Minnesota's not a very sexy place, Nate. And she ended up coming back up here, coming to visit me. And what ended up... When she tells people what got her to come here and stay here was I took a spade out in the pasture and I dug down and I brought up some of our soil, our topsoil, and I showed it to her and she says, wow, that's amazing compost. Did you make that? And I laughed. I said, no, this is what the soil looks like here. And her face just went blank because she just couldn't even comprehend a rich black topsoil like that because she's never seen it.

Nate Hagens (00:08:47):

To the right person soil can be sexy.

Daniel Zetah (00:08:50):

That's correct.

Nate Hagens (00:08:52):

Yeah.

Daniel Zetah (00:08:53):

And luckily she was that right person.

Nate Hagens (00:08:55):

So when we first spoke, you talked about three things that a person can do to start towards the light as you refer to after listening and learning to all the things in the great simplification. If I recall, one was growing some food or being close to people that are growing food. Two was meditating. And I think the third one is having part in killing another being, an animal like a cow or something like that for your sustenance. And I think you also wanted to talk about our cultural misinformation and how we're disconnected from knowledge and wisdom. So where would you like to start? I don't have any questions planned for you. I just wanted to have just a conversation about your life and your ethics and your worldview and how you might think there are a lot of people that are feeling what you're feeling but don't know how to activate it.

Daniel Zetah (00:10:10):

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So I think that's what I'd like to use as a jumping off point is I feel like a lot of people that are listening and watching your podcasts are understanding of all of the predicament that we find ourselves in as a civilization, as a species. And they want to know what to do. And I think a lot of people grew up in the suburbs, they grew up in the city, or even they grew up in small towns. But let's face it, the generational knowledge chain of how to meet your own needs has been severed generations ago. Even my parents, they're 86 years old, they didn't get taught a lot of things even though their parents knew how to do everything. They didn't learn a lot of that stuff. So by the time I came along, I didn't learn a lot of this stuff either.

(00:10:58):

Like, I didn't know anything about tree identification, where to find medicine in my environment, really anything about my ecology or the ecological history. And I had to learn all of that stuff. And it was hard fought knowledge. But I think a lot of people are looking for some place to put their energy, and I'm afraid that too many people are putting all of their hopes in some system change, something like the government's going to change. If I vote the right person in, things will get better, or if I buy certain things, things will get better. But I'm like, even activists, traditional activism in this culture revolves around fighting things that you don't want. And I think I wanted to flip that on its head, what can we put our energy, our human energy, our life, livelihoods towards to, because we want to see more of it.

(00:12:06):

And I want to see more food grown in a local and ecologically sustainable, resilient way. And I want to see more community and I want to see more sovereignty. And so that's what I'm doing because what else am I going to do? I can't sit and wait for somebody else to do that. And to be honest, I was filled with existential angst for a long time because knowing all of these things that you and I talk about a lot, it's hard not to be filled with some kind of existential dread. But when you're actually doing something or doing as much as you can towards changing that, even if it's one little corner of the world, I sleep soundly at night because I'm like, I'm doing everything I can.

Nate Hagens (00:12:55):

You mentioned sovereignty. What did you mean by that?

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Daniel Zetah (00:12:59):

So when I think of a sovereign human being, I think of somebody, the antithesis to a voter and a consumer. And then unfortunately that's what most people are these days because that's their level of intervention into the system, I can vote for somebody or I can choose to buy things that are better or worse. In my estimation, when someone is a sovereign individual, they are meeting the majority or at least a bunch of their basic physiological needs. So if I'm growing my own food, if I'm making my own shelter, if I'm making my own medicine, if I'm finding my own water, if I'm heating my own home with my hands and my wits, that's a sovereign individual, I mean, that's what our ancestors did for thousands and thousands of years. They weren't consumers.

Nate Hagens (00:13:59):

Is being a sovereign individual a sliding scale, a spectrum, because I grow a lot of my own food, I eat chicken, eggs and potatoes, and I know a lot of the trees here, but I also work 60 or 70 hours a week trying to pass the baton to other humans in the world. And I don't have the MacGyver skills to farm that you do. Is it a spectrum, and how does-

Daniel Zetah (00:14:27):

You're on the spectrum, Nate.

Nate Hagens (00:14:27):

... someone listening to this- But how does someone listening to this get started from just being a consumer and a voter towards living a self sovereign life?

Daniel Zetah (00:14:43):

Well, the first thing I tell people in this journey is stop buying things that you don't need. Because every time we buy something that we don't need, we're literally handcuffing ourselves to that system. And we don't have the space, the mental space, because that's what really what money is that it's our lives. It's like minutes of our life that we're trading for things. And if we're trading it for things that we don't need, then we're literally trading away our lives. So first thing is just stop buying things.

Nate Hagens (00:15:16):

How does someone differentiate between what they want and what they need?

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Daniel Zetah (00:15:22):

Boy, that's a darn good question, and I wish they'd asked that in schools. But yes, needs versus wants is a very big thing. And I would say, I'm sure you've heard the rule of threes. Hold your breath for three minutes and see what happens. Do you need air? Yep. You need air. Go without drinking for three days. See what happens. Do you need water? Yes, absolutely. You need water. Go for three weeks without eating. Do you need food? Absolutely. You need food. There's certain things that you can tell pretty quickly. If we're a biological being, do we need this or not? And most of the things that people are spending their energy and time and life on are not things that we need. I would venture to guess that 90 plus percent of the things that are in our GDP of our economy are things that people do not need.

Nate Hagens (00:16:17):

Do you have a smartphone?

Daniel Zetah (00:16:20):

I do. I have an old smartphone that I... All of my technology, we get secondhand that's either broken and I fix it, or it's just given to us because it's out of date. And so my wife and I share a smartphone. She's got this Mac computer that I found used. So yeah, it's not like we're Luddites, but we just choose to make sure that when we do spend money on things that we don't need, we spend as little as humanly possible, but that frees up a lot of my energy to do different things.

Nate Hagens (00:16:53):

How important is it to be surrounded by people that share the philosophy that you're espousing here? Because I would imagine if it's just you and your wife without any people agreeing with you that that's psychologically difficult. Yes?

Daniel Zetah (00:17:13):

It is psychologically difficult because that's the situation that we find ourselves in. There are very few people around here that share similar values to us. And I feel like that is also another issue that we need to discuss because the people in our culture that seem to care about the ecology or the broader implications of our situation as human beings tend to silo themselves in urban areas for the most part. And then there's a few of them that get back into the country to try to start growing some food,

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get back onto the resilient spectrum like you are, and they find themselves like, okay, now I can do this physical stuff in the country, but I'm surrounded by people that may or may not have similar values, and it is a lonely existence at times.

Nate Hagens (00:18:08):

Is it really a difference in values or is it possibly more a different in education and perspective that the money, technology narrative has suppressed their deeply held values? And if they saw what you saw or to a hundred of my podcasts over a couple of years that the values start to reemerge once the energy blinders have been removed? I'm just asking. I don't know.

Daniel Zetah (00:18:37):

And that's a good question as well. And I want to know that. I feel like every time we have a workshop and we have workshops throughout the summer months about, there's one coming up this weekend, wild foraging and plant medicine. And I would say 98% of people that come to those workshops are from the city, which is an hour and a half away in Minneapolis. Very few people locally come here. Why? I have no idea. It just seems like most people that are local just aren't interested in any of these things that we're offering. Whereas people in the city that are living in the suburbs, they are, they're hungry for this. They're hungry for some kind of authenticity.

(00:19:20):

But at the same time, when we find those people and we talk to them, a lot of them have become good friends and they come back to the farm over and over and over. We are like, how can we help you get out? Because they always tell us that they want to get out of that system, and we're like, we're here for you, we will help you in any way we can. But they've got every excuse in the book as to why that's just not right for them to do it just yet. And I think a lot of it is they don't want to be away from all of the people that they know in the city.

Nate Hagens (00:19:54):

The people, the conveniences, the entertainment, the stimulation, the comfort, I expect... Of course, I don't know if you saw the Frankly I did a couple of weeks ago. It was about probability, perception and reality. I don't know what's going to happen in the future. And when I say there's a great simplification coming, that's the middle of

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my distribution, other possibilities, but in the middle of my expectations, the most likely thing is within a decade, you are going to be incredibly busy, popular and in demand because people that have your skillsets are fewer than they should be. And so a lot of people will choose to live closer on the spectrum to what you're doing when they're forced to.

(00:20:44):

And one of the reasons-

Daniel Zetah (00:20:45):

That's right.

Nate Hagens (00:20:46):

... that I'm doing this podcast is we can get more pilots and scout teams of community, not necessarily... I mean, this is not a Luddite philosophy. I espouse appropriate technology, and I don't know what the future's going to be, but I think we need more people, like you say, that are sovereign individuals and being a sovereign individual in a world where we have all the knowledge of human history at our fingertips and we can order anything delivered to our house overnight, it takes a lot of mental fortitude to buck the trend on those conveniences.

Daniel Zetah (00:21:25):

It is. Like just yesterday I was having a hard day because I feel like... I was planting oak trees out in the pasture, and a father, a daughter from Australia actually stopped by and the daughter was really interested in regenerative farming, so they drove past hoping that we'd be home, and they saw me out there. So they came up and they ended up spending three hours here talking to us. They had lunch here, great people. But yeah, every young person I meet, for the most part, even if they come here for an internship for three months during the growing season, and they're talking about this stuff for three months straight, they're captive audience. I can sit here and talk about all of the things that you and I talk about for three months, and they're like nodding their head in agreeance, and they totally understand, they totally get it but when the three months is over, they go right back to the city because that's where everybody is.

Nate Hagens (00:22:29):

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If five of their friends went through the same thing, that's a different story I would expect because then they have a solidarity-

Daniel Zetah (00:22:37):

That's right.

Nate Hagens (00:22:37):

... and a shared experience.

Daniel Zetah (00:22:40):

Absolutely. And I tell this to people I've helped teach permaculture courses around the world, and every time I've ever taught a permaculture course where it's two weeks, 10 days, whatever, the majority of people are coming are people from the suburbs and they're quietly unhappy with their lives, and they come to this 10 day workshop and they have-

Daniel Zetah (00:23:03):

This 10 day workshop and they have their paradigms exploded and they open up their eyes completely as to what our situation is, what needs to be done. And at that last day, they're all gathered together, wide-eyed and excited to go back to their lives and change everything. And they all do. They all go back to their lives with that same enthusiasm. But what happens is that everyone in their life that didn't go to that workshop is their parents, their coworkers, their family, their friends. They listen to them tell the story about this workshop experience and how everything's got to change. And they're like, "Yeah, that's nice and all, but just get back to work. Get back to what you've been doing." And unless you've got the courage to radically change your life, which I believe is radically changing your environment, and a lot of times you just have to temporarily just leave everybody that's poo-pooing your new reality and go towards people that are actually doing it and hang out with them.

(00:24:07):

I learned that early on in life that if you want to do something in this world and you don't know how, find people already doing it and hang out with them and you will end up doing it. And the same goes as for a different reality, if you want to change your reality completely, you need to find different people and hang out with them.

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Nate Hagens (00:24:25):

I agree with that and have found that to be true. So for people that are interested in transitioning to a new reality or a different way of life, somewhere higher up on the resiliency spectrum, is this expensive or out of reach for most people? And what's your advice to people that can't go whole hog, so to speak, but who want to change the way they live to be more in tandem with their values and get started?

Daniel Zetah (00:24:56):

So because it is a spectrum, like we talked about, any point of intervention, that's the easiest, lowest hanging fruit for you to get started is the best place to start. So whether that's getting some pots on your patio because you're just renting an apartment and start growing something to actually feel the superhuman power of planting a seed and watching something come up and eating it, that's a good place to start. Not buying things that you don't need so you have more time and more energy. When you have more time and energy and you're not living paycheck to paycheck to pay off all the debt for all of the things that you bought to impress people that you don't like. It's just this getting off the cycle. The moment you have a bit more time, you can actually start reading more books on how do I do these things?

(00:25:46):

Or finding people in your community that are already doing certain things that you want to skill up on and just going to them and saying, "Hey, I just want to shadow you." I mean, that's how I learned the majority of things that I've got in my head right now is that I identified skills that I wanted. I found people in my travels that were already mastered at those skills and I just said, "I want to help you." And I had the privilege of not having a whole bunch of bills and debt to pay off, and that was a gigantic privilege. I get that. But if you were in that position, and a lot of people are, find somebody that's doing the things that you want to learn and just say, "I want to help." And you're going to learn a lot of stuff.

Nate Hagens (00:26:32):

What county do you live in?

Daniel Zetah (00:26:35):

I live in McLeod County in Minnesota, south central Minnesota.

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Nate Hagens (00:26:39):

So what if there were 10 people like you or 50 people like you or 300 people like you in McLeod County, how would that synergize and expand your efforts, knowledge, success and cultural knowledge shift?

Daniel Zetah (00:27:01):

I daydream about that almost daily because I think about the agricultural or agrarian community that once existed, even when I was a small boy. Every single farm around here had people, a family living on it that they were actually growing food for themselves. They had a diversified family farm. They weren't just growing corn and soybeans. I mean, we'll get to big Ag and what I think about that, but I'll just say briefly. It scares the bejesus out of me to think that there are farmers all around me now that are cultivating 2000 to 5,000 acres and they don't grow one calorie of food that they can actually consume. They are just as reliant on that industrial supermarket system as somebody that lives in the urban areas. And that's terrifying to me because they're chasing the money. And that's where our, one of the last podcasts that you did with the fellow that talked about subsidies, he really hit the nail on the head.

(00:28:14):

I think he said it was \$182 billion every year are going towards agricultural subsidies to grow commodity crops. And so that's where the money is. I mean, there's combines driving past in the fall that are worth a million dollars, more than my entire farm. And right now they're driving back and forth with these planters that are 50 feet wide with tractors that are worth \$700,000 because there's so much money there to just grow corn and soybeans, corn and soybeans, corn and soybeans, and nobody can eat yellow dent number two.

Nate Hagens (00:28:49):

So the reason they're doing that is the optionality of money. If they have digits in the bank, they can buy food and take trips and do whatever. But in a world of reduced complexity, both in our economy and in our own lives, some of this is going to have to change. And so let's talk about small scale agriculture versus large scale. Arguments can be made that if fossil, carbon, oil and natural gas are abundant and cheap in the future, that the amount of food that can be grown on 2000 acres with a limited amount of human input is going to be a much more than what you could do. But A, if

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things get less available or more costly. Or B, if the economy is such that we need a lot more human labor being applied to the land, you could probably actually grow more calories and healthier calories and healthier for yourself. So if we shift away from cheap fossil agriculture, there are many opportunities to do things differently. What do you think about all that?

Daniel Zetah (00:30:19):

So what I tell people about the agricultural system as it stands is we have a situation where we have dirt instead of soil. And so right now the difference between dirt and soil is soil is alive, dirt is not. Dirt is just a growing medium, and that's how the majority of industrial agriculture treats the soil. They treat it like dirt, it is dead. They've killed it with all of the pesticides, all of the chemicals, all of the nitrogen fertilizer. And so the life is gone out of that soil and the capacity for that soil to grow calories is going down exponentially unless you can temporarily prop it up with more chemical inputs. And so right now we're kind of just barely keeping it at a level and as your show will tell everyone, it is going to go down. And so basically you've got this divergent equation where you've got a growing population and you've got the capacity for this industrial agricultural system to feed people is actually going down.

(00:31:31):

And so you've got this divergent equation that's going to end in tears. I don't know when, at some point it is going to cross that threshold and we're going to have a lot of people very hungry because we've put all of our eggs in that basket.

Nate Hagens (00:31:47):

It's actually worse than that because the soil, as you suggest that has been intensively farmed with nitrogen, ammonia, additions and tractors is depleted versus 50, 80 years ago. So it's not like we just go back to the land like it was 50 or 60 years ago because the soil is in much, much worse shape, not in your farm probably. Perhaps Stephanie is naturally looking two or three steps ahead because from that vantage point, a really deep rich topsoil can be literally sexy from a natural selection standpoint. But go on, I interrupted you.

Daniel Zetah (00:32:35):

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So I'm going to talk to that. About 10 years ago I was riding my bicycle, my recumbent bike from the farm down to Missouri to do a, I think it was a straw bale building workshop. And I was riding through northern Iowa and we had this rain event. It was probably four inches of rain one night all in a couple of hours. And the next morning I was riding next to the Iowa River and I was seeing gullies in farm fields that you could literally stand in. And I was looking at the water in the river that was flowing turbulently, and I realized that not only was it brown, it was viscous like a chocolate milkshake. And that was all of the topsoil that had run off into the river overnight. And I saw some people walking next to the river and I said, "Is this what this is normally like when it rains like this?" They're like, "Yeah, this is the way it always is." They thought nothing of it.

(00:33:37):

The thing is that Iowa had the richest topsoil resource that the earth has ever seen. Before white people came along and tilled up all of the prairies, that the average topsoil depth in Iowa was six feet. Some places had 12 feet of topsoil. And over the last 150 years of industrial ag, we have depleted half of that. Right now, the average topsoil depth in Iowa was three feet, which is still a lot of topsoil, but the thing that, we've actually burned through half of the world's richest topsoil resource in 150 years is mind-boggling.

Nate Hagens (00:34:17):

Why is the Iowa best topsoil in the world from a historical perspective? What happened there to create that?

Daniel Zetah (00:34:26):

I will tell you, so the reason why the Midwest has such beautiful topsoil is herbivores and tallgrass prairie. So tallgrass prairie roots, I mean tallgrass prairie plants are really tall. Some of big bluestem gets eight feet tall, and if it's eight feet tall above ground, the root system is almost double that. So you've got roots now going down 15 to 20 feet below grade. And the way that this has worked for the last 10,000 years since the ice age has gone and the glaciers retreated, is that we'd have these huge herds of bison or buffalo that would come through this area every year or two. And then they would go back south for the winter and then over winter further south, and then they'd come back in the next year. But they would come through the tallgrass

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prairie, they would trample it, they would eat half of it. They would poop and they'd pee and then they'd move on. So that ecological cycle of disturbance and rest every year for the last 10,000 years is what created this topsoil.

(00:35:45):

And every time the plants are chewed down to say half or even three-quarter, the root system is storing carbohydrate energy. That's what the roots are. It's taking the photons from the sun. It's through photosynthesis and it is creating an energy bank in the form of carbohydrate energy in its roots. So when the above ground plant gets chewed off, it has to take some from that bank account and put it back into the vegetative state so it can actually start photosynthesizing again. And so every single time they went through one of those cycles, those root systems, when they slough off to give that energy up to the plant, it sequestered some carbon. And so the average soil organic matter, which is basically another way of saying soil carbon in this region where I'm sitting right now, before white people came along, my ancestors came along and took it from the Native Americans and plowed up the tallgrass prairie.

(00:36:52):

The average topsoil or soil organic matter was 12 to 15%. Now the county average in this area is less than 2%. So the topsoil, the soil organic matter that we have on this farm is close to-

Nate Hagens (00:37:06):

I think globally, it's only 1%.

Daniel Zetah (00:37:11):

I would believe that because most people didn't start with such topsoil resource to begin with. So it's a lot lower in a lot of other places. My point is that we've got 93 million acres under cultivation just for corn every year in America right now. And if you extrapolate what a typical cornfield looks like, where it has less than 2% organic matter, and it once had, say on the average it was even 8%. You're talking about gigatons of carbon in the atmosphere that has been oxidized into the atmosphere through cultivation for the last 150 years. You're talking about a number that almost makes the amount of carbon that we've released by burning fossil fuels look small. This is the terrifying thing about learning about industrial agriculture is that you learn

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about how broken the system is, but at the same time you realize just how quickly it can turn around.

(00:38:20):

My farm, since Stephanie and I have started using regenerative practices, I mean we probably started off when we first came back here about 10 years ago together. We started off above the average, which we probably had about four to 5% organic matter, but I bet you we're probably close to six or seven by now. And a lot of people that are doing really intensive regenerative farming practices where they're using ruminant animals and grass, they are sometimes putting up three quarters to one percentage point per year. I mean, that's an incredible amount of carbon that we can sequester in a very short period of time if we had more people practicing regenerative farming.

Nate Hagens (00:39:07):

Kim Stanley Robinson was on the show a few weeks ago and he said that soil carbon in the world averaged 1%. And that his colleague suggested that if we could get that to 3%, which was conceivable, that that would draw down carbon to take us back to 350 or 370 parts per million. What would something like that, let's just assume that's in the ballpark. What would that entail and how could we shift 90 million acres dedicated to corn to more of the model that you have on your farm and could that grow enough food for everyone, et cetera? Why don't you expand on that or speculate on that a little bit.

Daniel Zetah (00:39:58):

From what I've seen, I would say that firstly we would have to realize that we pay less of our take home pay on food than any other industrialized nation in the world. I think the last time I saw was somewhere around 7% of our take home pay was put towards food, which is crazily low. And I think the first thing we need to do is for all of us, for consumers or producers to realize that the true cost of production of food grown in an ecologically sound way is going to be higher than the industrial system has been able to keep the prices artificially low for the last generation or two or three. Once we realized that we got to pay a little bit extra for food, and we're not talking about a lot. We're talking, if we went up to European standards, we're paying 15% on food. Or one of your last guests said, if we just obliterated all of the subsidies right now for

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industrial agriculture completely. Just take the subsidies off the table, 100%, let the market actually decide.

(00:41:13):

A lot of the red tribe will talk about, that we want a free market, but there isn't a free market. The market is absolutely wonky right now because we've been subsidizing certain things that we hold valuable for so long that it pushes other things down that we don't value at the time. But if we got rid of subsidies 100% across the board, farms like ours would actually be able to make some money. Right now, regenerative farming, and a lot of people will tell you that they'll write books and they'll have talks about how you can make farming work too, and you can buy a farm and you can make money farming. I'm not going to sit here and say that you can't, but you're going to have to work 80 hours a week, you're going to have to probably have off-farm income and you're going to have to let something slide. You're going to have to treat the animals not quite as well as you'd like.

(00:42:11):

You're going to have to treat the soil not quite as well as you'd like. I happen to be in a position of privilege in the fact that I inherited this farm from my parents, and so I don't have a huge amount of debt. So being able to just practice all of the things that regenerative farming can be to the nth degree because we don't have to make this farm pay for itself. I'm a mechanic, so I actually make most of my money in the winter by fixing people's trucks and tractors. But to go back to, could we feed the world this way? Absolutely. I've got 137 acres here and every single year that we're on this farm, the productive capacity for this farm land or this acre, this acreage gets better. It just continues to get better and better, and I don't see a point where it's going to stop. It just continues to get exponentially better.

Nate Hagens (00:43:08):

Why is that? Is it because the soil's getting better or because your skills are getting better?

Daniel Zetah (00:43:14):

No, it's because the soils are getting better. It's not just the soil, it's the entire system. The biological ecological system is alive, and some people believe in the Gaia theory. I think that that's true. The earth and its systems are a living, breathing process. And if

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we're not killing everything in that process in trying to grow food and instead we're actually working with nature rather than against her, then nature can continue to get stronger and healthier and more productive. And you're basically only eating the... instead of eating into your capital, you're eating your interest. And right now, if we've been eating our capital for generations and we're only on this regenerative farm now, we're eating the interests. So I tell people we grow food as a byproduct of ecological restoration, and that's true.

(00:44:19):

Our main goal is to restore the ecology because in exchange for that, we get fed. And the only limiting factor to how much food that this system could produce is, to backpedal to your earlier question, what does it look like in this county if there's 50 more people like me living this way? I can't even imagine how much food you could grow on a hundred acres if you had a committed group of people practicing these same systems or these same strategies. I would say that with this, because we have so much fertility and capacity on this land or in this region. I would say that we could probably feed close to a hundred families on a hundred acres quite easily.

Nate Hagens (00:45:17):

With a lot more human input, human labor, those people couldn't be playing Xbox or doing consulting so much.

Daniel Zetah (00:45:27):

No. That is the limiting factor is human energy, because that's why, I'll tell this statistic too because it blows most people's minds. But the last census that we had in America showed that for the very first time in American history, there was less than 1% of Americans lived and worked on farms. The latest number was 0.67% of Americans actually produced food. And of that 0.67%, I would say the vast majority of that are growing corn and soybeans. And so the percentage of people that are actually producing food that is fit for human consumption is probably on the order of a percent of a percent. And that's the reason why the dirty little secret to sustainable agriculture is that it's not sustainable, because the very few people practicing sustainable agriculture are internalizing the cost of production rather than externalizing the cost, which is what industrial agriculture does. And that makes it so that it's not sustainable in their family, their energy, their finances. They're

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internalizing all those costs of, "I'm not going to make any money by doing this, but I'm going to do it right." And that's not sustainable.

(00:46:47):

So if there was more people that were actually able to even just come and do some weeding, I could... For this particular farm, if there were more people willing to just come do weeding or come just do some manual labor, I could be freed up to do a whole bunch of other things that I'm capable of doing with the skills that I have. Or I could be teaching far more people how to do exactly what I know how to do. I've been telling people for a long time that we're getting to a position in history where we have to teach more people more things in a shorter period of time than ever in human history. And the bottleneck is going to be, who has those skills and is there enough of them to teach the amount of people that we need to teach?

Nate Hagens (00:47:37):

I agree with you. You have cows. How do herbivores and ruminants factor into the ecological restoration and the lifecycle of your farm and your annual practice?

Daniel Zetah (00:47:59):

So ruminants, I believe, are critical in regenerative agriculture. They're the engine in this whole system, and because... All right, so I'll get down to the Ecology 101. There is no monocultures in nature. Nature abhors a vacuum. It doesn't like it when there's open ground. And so in nature, if there's ever an event where there's some kind of disturbance, like a tree falls and it opens up some soil, the first things that come in to cover that soil are the pioneer species or what we consider weeds. That's what we call weeds. But those plants stabilize that soil until other plants in the plant community can come in and balance that whole thing out. So what we've done for the last 10,000 years in agriculture is tilling the soil and literally creating a seedbed, which means that you've destroyed every other plant community in that area.

(00:49:09):

In that field, whatever you want to want to call it, you've destroyed everything there. And by doing so, you've destroyed the habitat for all of the other critters and you've oxidized carbon. Every time you till that soil, you're oxidizing carbon. So we absolutely need to get away from monocultures, where we're tilling soil to plant annuals every single year. That's the thing about annuals, they've got a high energy return. They're

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really energy dense. But the cost of them is that you have to till the soil every year to plant them. And the reason why indigenous cultures were sustainable and as far as I'm concerned, is that they didn't practice agriculture in the fact that they didn't till the soil to plant a whole bunch of plants. I'm sure they did some to some degree, but that wasn't their majority of how they grew their food. The majority of how they grew their food was harvested from intact ecological systems that were perennial.

(00:50:16):

And by perennial I mean that those plants, they die and they'd go dormant in the winter and they come back in the spring in northern climates or when it's cold. In other areas where it doesn't get cold and there's no dormancy, those plants just are constantly there. So the root systems are always there. Their soil is never disturbed. And we get food from that system that is continuous, undisturbed system. So what I can see is we need to use the cattle because I can't synthesize carbon, Nate, neither can you. We can't eat cellulose. We can't eat grass, but cows can and I can eat cows. So to me, they're the perfect regenerative farming partner in the fact that they can turn this perennial system, which this is what my farm was meant to grow, is grass. And that's what we grow a lot of.

(00:51:17):

We've got 38 acres of native tall grass prairie that was reestablished about 10, 12, 13 years ago. And we've got another 20 acres of cool season pasture, which is European style grasses. And so between that, and we've probably got an acre of garden, maybe three-quarters of an acre of garden that we actually cultivate. But the majority of food that we grow here is meat-based. And this is another thing that I'd like to touch on is that I feel like meat has become a four letter word, if I may, in most urban situations. Because we've been told by a lot of the science, that is very reductionist in it's thinking, like you talk about, we are so reductionist that we think that it's the cow, not the how.

(00:52:13):

And so we were looking at yes, when we have cows in a feed lot, when we're feeding them corn, that they're not meant to eat and they're in confinements, they're standing in their own excrement shoulder to shoulder with a thousand other cows, and we're wondering why they produce so much methane. Of course, they're producing methane, because their gut is so screwed up from eating stuff that they're not meant to eat, but that's all we're giving them. And so we're pumping them full of antibiotics because

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they're getting sick because they're not eating what they're meant to eat. And so now they're healthier yet, and their gut microflora and bacteria is all screwed up as well. So they're just producing - they're like methane factories. Whereas cows that are actually grazing in a regenerative fashion, where they're on grass like they're supposed to be, they produce a fifth or a tenth of the methane that these other cows do in a feed lot.

(00:53:10):

And so then it begs the question that you've got this next nexus of people that have been hearing that meat is this bad thing for the last two, three generations. And that's where veganism came out of. And I applaud vegans or people as I call them, I don't like to call them vegans because it puts them in a box, but to say people that are currently choosing a vegan diet, they're doing it mostly because they care. So I applaud them in the fact that they care. They want to do something better. They realize the horrors of industrial agriculture and the horrors of industrial animal raising, And they don't want to be part of that. I mean, heck, I was a vegetarian for six or seven years for that same reason. But once you realize that we can't live in an ecological system that is sustainable or healthy without these ruminant animals, and realizing that if I want to truly eat sustainably, I have to eat meat.

(00:54:13):

Because if I'm eating, say corn, or soy, or any other plants that are grown in a monocultural situation where we're tilling the soil, we have to realize I love cows more than anybody, because I grew up with cows. But why is a cow's life worth more than all of the snakes, and mice, and voles living out in those fields? Because when we're tilling those fields to grow a monoculture, we're killing off millions or billions of species, of beings every time we do that. So there is no way to eat a sustainable vegetarian or vegan diet from the industrial system as far as I'm concerned. And I just wish that more people could understand that so they could actually choose a different path.

Nate Hagens (00:55:02):

So I have a bunch of questions on that. Thank you for that. First of all, I've long known that most of the CO<sub>2</sub> impact from eating beef is from the CAFO feedlots where they fatten them up before they kill them. And you mentioned that the cows on your farm emit perhaps a fifth or a tenth as much methane as a confined animal food lot operation. But with the addition of the ecological cycling of trampling, pooping, eating

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the grass and the cycle, would you argue that your a-hundred-some acres, the way that you do things, is actually net carbon positive? Your treatment of cows full cycle is actually sequestering carbon rather than emitting it in total boundary?

Daniel Zetah (00:56:09):

Absolutely. I would say that just if you're looking at methane only, if we're going to get reductionist here and say, "All we care about is methane," if there was a correlation where it was one and one, let's just say that the feedlot cows were producing the same amount of methane as the cows that I have out on pasture, and that was a moot point. We're still sequestering so much more carbon by their energy cycling with the plants that I would say that we're still a net sequester of carbon, even if it was producing that much methane. But it's not. All of the studies that I've seen and read are showing that cows on grass are producing far less methane than their brethren that are locked up in a confinement.

Nate Hagens (00:57:04):

So in theory, if we had a lot more people working on the land, we didn't have as industrialized agriculture, which meant that our monetary profits might be less, we had more ruminants working the land in a cycle like you're talking about, we had people eating beef because beef comes from cows, that the full cycle carbon impact of that, that would be good for climate change and good for voles, snakes, ecosystems, and the web of life other than the cows who have to die?

Daniel Zetah (00:57:51):

Absolutely, 100%. And not only that, but it's good for us. I would be remiss in not extending my gratitude for the life that I have. Today, Stephanie made fresh-baked bread from wheat that I grew and harvested with an old John Deere combine that I pulled behind my grandfather's tractor from 1950s. We milled it up here in our stone mill. She put it in our wood-fired oven, and out comes this beautiful, fresh-baked bread. I had that and sirloin steak for breakfast, eggs from the chickens, greens from... Right now the garden's not producing, but there's Virginia waterleaf, which is basically wild spinach growing everywhere in the woods here. So we're eating that. We're eating dandelion greens. I eat like royalty. We live like peasants, but we eat like royalty.

(00:58:51):

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And as far as how wealthy I feel and the fact that I don't ever have to wake up to an alarm clock, that's true wealth right there. To eat all the food that you grow, we grow probably 80 to 85% of our own calories, and not only the satisfaction of knowing where the food comes from, but just the spiritual aspect of knowing that you were part of this system, that you're actually creating life. You're harvesting some life to give life back to you that you could then give back to life again. That's true wealth right there. So it's not only good for the animals in that system, it's not only good for the soil, it's not only good for the ecology, it's good for us. People are meant to live this way. And I feel like the majority of our health problems and the majority of our mental health problems would disappear in a generation if we were to return back to some form of land-based living. Yes.

Nate Hagens (01:00:04):

So I imagine that other than the last few moments of their life, your cows on your farm live pretty good lives for a cow.

Daniel Zetah (01:00:14):

So all of our animals here are born on this land, and they live the best life possible on this land. And when it's their time, I'm the one that shoots them. And so they're literally standing up next to their buddies, chewing their cud. Or a lot of times we bring out some of their favorite treats, like apples. Stephanie trains our cows with apples. They love apples. And so anytime that they're out and we want them to come, she just holds up a bucket and they're like, "Ooh, apples," and they come running. And so we give them apples. And while they're chewing on apples, I shoot them. And they fall right there. And so they live the best life and they have the best death.

(01:00:55):

And that's a part of this, too. Our culture is so death averse. We don't talk about it. We don't want to think about it. And as a result, we're shit scared of it. And the thing is that you can be scared of death all you want, you're still going to die. So if we come to terms with that and we realize that, "Okay, death is inevitable, but the kind of death that we have and the kind of death that we give to these other beings that are giving their lives for us doesn't have to be painful, doesn't have to be long, drawn-out suffering. It can be quick. It can be dignified. It can be respectful." I think that's a big part of this.

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Nate Hagens (01:01:40):

I don't disagree with you. Probably 95% of the red meat I've had in the last two years is from a deer I shot two years ago. I felt bad about it. I didn't enjoy cleaning of it. My dad and I cleaned, quartered, skinned, everything, processed it, made it into hamburger, and cut everything ourselves, which was hard for me. But I felt a certain full circle satisfaction with the packages in the freezer. And I said a little prayer when it was killed with one shot. I haven't hunted since then. I don't feel an urge to. And I eat chicken and I eat fish. I haven't eaten pork in over a dozen years. I eat beef if a friend like you gives me some, but very rarely. But I live on a farm. We have horses, chickens, guineafowl, cats, dogs. And I would love to get some goats, because they're so fun and interesting. And plus they eat around different plants that I need someone to weed, et cetera.

(01:02:54):

But it's like more pets and I couldn't justify the extra time and expense unless I killed them. And my girlfriend said, "Absolutely not. We can't do that." And I agreed with her. How do you manage getting to know these cows and they're quirky personalities? Cows are so curious. I go on bike rides. I always get off my bike and I go and stop and talk to the cows. And they're cocking their head and they walk up to me and they're really curious. How do you mentally process the morning that you have to harvest, as you say, give the apples and shoot one of these cows? What's going through your mind? What's that like?

Daniel Zetah (01:03:42):

So when I wake up on a slaughter day, I do feel some trepidation in the fact that I just want to make sure that it's a good shot. I want to make sure that they die quickly and painlessly. And that's a lot of responsibility on me. But the reason why I choose to take that responsibility myself is because I'm trying to, one, pay for the fact that I went for the majority of my life never killing a cow. Even my family here, we raised grass-fed beef on this farm for 40 years before Stephanie and I took over. And every single time that we did that, those cows, even though they were organic, not certified, but there were no chemicals, we've no anything, no hormones or anything, they would get put on a truck and they would get sent to the same abattoir or industrial system as all these other cows. And then my parents would just go to the supermarket and buy meat.

(01:04:48):

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And so I never knew that system or that cycle, the symbiosis and how that can be. And I also just realized those poor people that have to work in those slaughterhouses, those abattoirs, where they're killing animals eight hours a day or 12 hours a day for four or five days a week for years on end, that is something that human beings have never been asked to do for the vast majority of our history. And I think it's absolutely immoral that we expect somebody to be doing that job for very little pay at all. And to be honest, the reason why I'm okay with killing animals that I've known for 15 years and I've gone out and scratched, them, and pet them, and talked to them, and helped them birth, they're like my friends. They really are.

(01:05:47):

I'm okay with shooting them in the head and killing them, because I know that for me to live something else has to die. And I think every one of us has to understand that reality. We live on a biophysical plane where life begets life. And if we aren't understanding of that, we're going to continue making decisions where everything, all of the death happens somewhere else and somebody else's responsibility of doing that and it comes to you. I didn't want to do that anymore. So I'm taking responsibility from here on out. And as hard as it is at the end of a slaughter day, I'm wiped. Emotionally, I'm wiped out. I just want to sit and just be alone for a while. But I think that that's a natural response to the reverence that I hold for these beings that have just given the ultimate sacrifice for my life.

Nate Hagens (01:06:48):

At least you're doing it consciously. And I really resonate with what you're saying. I don't have a problem with people who say, "I don't like hunting and you shouldn't shoot deer." But I do have a problem with people that say, "I don't like hunting and shooting deer," but they'll go to the supermarket and buy a package of nicely-presented beef, or pork chops, or something like that because it's out of sight, out of mind. And the whole process that resulted in that package being there is they don't have to be part of it. So the fact that you are consciously doing the full cycle, I think, is healthy, is normal. And I think we either have to be some... Well, there's no direct answer here other than being aware of it. And I do think you are right that these things are... I think our culture has become...

(01:07:53):

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I did a podcast last week with a woman from Lebanon. It'll probably air before this one does. And she had lived in the United States for a while and said, "Americans are soft and I had to get out of there." And I think that's true. And what you're trying to do is you have a similar environmental, long-term ethic that I have. You lived around the world. You did various things. You probably are much more mechanically inclined than I am. But you came back, as you said, to the belly of the beast. And you're living your values in a way that makes sense to you. And I applaud you for it. I don't eat the chickens on our farm. We just eat the eggs. So we don't have a meat component here. It's all vegetables, and potatoes, and kale, and things like that. But I respect what you're doing. Do you kill all the cows eventually on your farm or only some of them?

Daniel Zetah (01:08:53):

Everything has to do its part. So at some stage, everything will die here, including me.

Nate Hagens (01:09:02):

Yeah.

Daniel Zetah (01:09:03):

But yeah, when you think about how we evolved, young children were having a part in the processing of animals at a very young age, and they were seeing death everywhere. Whether it was the death of an animal that one of their parents or one of their community killed to keep them alive or whether it was death of just like... Because you can't be in a functioning ecology without witnessing death, because it's a very much a part of the system, just like life is. And I feel like keeping that away from children is really bad. And we've been doing that for too many generations now. One thing that we love to do here is we love to introduce kids into this. We've got a local family that's been coming out now for almost three years and there's three kids that are part of this family.

(01:10:07):

One of them, her name's Quinn, she's nine years old, she's been coming out here now for three years. We help homeschool her and the last time we did a chicken slaughter, she eviscerated for the first time. I was so proud of her because... She didn't like it. I mean, nobody likes sticking their hand up inside of a chicken and taking the guts out, but it has to be done. The fact is that she's been watching us do it now for the last two

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years before that and she realized, "Okay, this is all part of it and I want to help." So we got her in there and she got in there and she did it. She did like a champ.

(01:10:53):

And every time somebody comes out that wants to have that experience for the first time where they actually have a hand in killing and processing, we take some of the blood from the animal that we're killing and we put a little mark on their forehead. And we say we've just in been inducted into the agrarian community because I feel like that's a rite of passage that most people don't have. Most people don't have any rights of passage in this culture anymore. I think that that's also an issue.

Nate Hagens (01:11:29):

How are we going to reframe our culture story? Is it going to be under fire? What are things that our current cultural story in the U.S. are going to massively shift as we head towards less material wealth? Do you have any speculation on that?

Daniel Zetah (01:11:49):

The name of our farm is called New Story Farm, and that was actually inspired by a book called *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn. And I know that when we first talked, you mentioned that-

Nate Hagens (01:12:00):

I assigned *Ishmael* to my students.

Daniel Zetah (01:12:04):

Good. I'm glad. We buy that book in bulk and we give it out to anybody that's interested because I do believe that the root cause of a lot of our issues, most of our issues as a species, is the disconnection that we have in our reality because of the cultural stories that we were told. And our creation story in the western world is one of, the world was created for us and especially the Christian. I got nothing against Christianity per se, but the creation story of Genesis, I believe is pretty whack in the fact that it's like, "Go forth, be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over everything that walks, crawls and slithers." That sentence alone I believe has blood all over it. And the fact that it set us up to be completely separate and apart from nature that no other culture in the history of humans has ever had that disconnection.

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(01:13:11):

So I believe that what Daniel Quinn was trying to say is that we have to be conscious of the power of cultural stories because most of the powerful cultural stories are so powerful that we don't even recognize them as being a part of why our reality is the way it is. And so if we're conscious of it and conscious of the power of those stories, then we can actually look at those stories and say, "Are these stories serving us? Are these stories that we've been enacting for however long actually good for us in the long term?" Because if they're not, these were created by man. We can create different stories and we can enact different stories. And I believe that that is a big piece of this puzzle is to find what isn't working and find stories to replace them.

(01:14:10):

So that's why we call this New Story Farm. I'm under no illusions that what we're doing is the be-all end-all, and this is not technically sustainable either. We're still using fossil fuels. I don't believe that we should be using any fossil fuels and in a time, I call it voluntary energy austerity. What we're doing right now is we're actively trying to wean ourselves off of energy as much as we can to the point where we're not going to burn out physically. With the fact that we're only two people and with a few people that come here on a weekly basis, there's only so much that we could do with the human energy at our disposal. If and when we have more people that are willing to come and live this way... And that's why we're building the student accommodation. That's why I built this old 1930s chicken coop into a community space because we are setting ourselves up for an intentional community to take shape here. So we want to have maybe five to 10 families eventually living on this farm and living on this land base.

(01:15:19):

Then once that's established, we want to help purchase or secure, procure all of the rejoining farmland and farms and getting more people that want to live this way on those parcels as well, so we can have an adjacent agricultural or agrarian community once again.

Nate Hagens (01:15:40):

A few hours west of you, there are such communities that are quite large, the Hutterites in Western or Eastern North and South Dakota are doing this at a large scale, are they not?

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Daniel Zetah (01:15:56):

They are, and I've got a lot of respect for the Anabaptist faith for that. One time, right before I met Stephanie, I actually wanted to get out of Minnesota, off the farm. This was probably 11 years ago. I just had to get out of here because it was just my parents and I. I love my parents, but I don't want to spend the winter with them. So I put my thumb out and I went hitchhiking and I ended up in Madison, Wisconsin at a biodynamic conference. And one of the keynote speakers was this herb farmer in Maine, and I got to chatting with her afterwards. Also, Charles Eisenstein was the keynote speaker and I got to meet him. He's a fantastic fellow that has a lot of really interesting writings and discussions about the topic of culture.

(01:16:47):

But I ended up out in Maine working on this herb farm and after a month I met this fellow that came, his name was Kenneth. He was an old order Amish fellow, and he was probably mid- fifties and just the week before I met him, he had lost his faith. Which doesn't happen very often to somebody that's in an older Amish community, I can tell you. He was full of questions. He's like, "I'd have never read anything that wasn't a religious text. What would you suggest? I've never watched a movie. What would you suggest?" I'm like, "Oh man." He invited me back to his farm and I ended up spending a month with him on his farm and his family was shunning him. Most of his family had left. It was just his wife and his youngest kids.

(01:17:37):

The community was shunning him, but for whatever reason of the rules, I was allowed to go to these work parties in his stead. So I went to barn raisings while I was there. I went to four of them and I got to work with these people that... It was like an experience I've never had. It was like a hive mind where 30 guys are working on a building and they all have similar skill levels because all of the... I don't agree with the hierarchy being so patriarchal, but the way it was set up. All the women were cooking or in the kitchen and all the young girls were watching them and learning that. And all of the young boys were just standing around watching the guys build and that's how they learned.

(01:18:20):

And so every single guy building on that building had similar skill levels. If I was hanging off a ladder and I needed a nail or a board, I didn't have to ask. They just

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handed it to me because everybody knew. There was very little talking going on and there was just a whole lot getting done. And I sometimes wonder what it would be like to live in a culture where people all understood what had to be done. They all had similar skill levels as to what needed to be done instead of taking all of this energy that we've had and just squandering it towards watching a grown man kick a ball around.

Nate Hagens (01:19:00):

Or many other frivolous uses of turning sunlight, ancient sunlight into dopamine. I really could ask you hours and hours of questions because in many ways you're living in a way that I would, if I wasn't so worried about the bend versus break cultural scenario and having a potential leverage to shift it, I would be doing more of what you're doing. Even though I didn't pay close attention to the MacGyver TV shows in the eighties and nineties, maybe you did? Well, you lived with an Amish for a month. I know when we spoke a few months ago, what role does meditation play in your life and on this journey that you're on?

Daniel Zetah (01:19:55):

So meditation doesn't play near as large of a role as I would like it to because I get so stuck in the physical material playing and the business of doing all of this and the justification that I'm doing good things that I just don't... I'm not as present as I would like to be. And my wife Stephanie is always reminding me that I need to come back to the present moment and I need to be more aware and conscious. So I appreciate that in her. But yeah, I did a couple of 10-day Vipassana meditation retreats, and those were very powerful experiences for me. They were like, I guess the simplest way that I could explain it, it's like bootcamp for your brain where our entire culture is, like you say, we're turning ancient sunlight into dopamine and we're chasing after good sensations.

(01:20:50):

We're running away from bad sensations. And so this meditation and most meditation is trying to train you to be equanimous with what is. The present moment is all we have. We don't have the past, we don't have the present. All we have is now. And if we're able to just sit with the now on an experiential level and actually understand that this is all we have, we can train ourselves to not chase and run. And if we can do

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that, we can make a lot better decisions. We can live a lot better lives. I think it's a really important thing for people to experience, and I'm so glad that I experienced it, even the little bit that I did. I would like to have more of a practice, but at the same time, a lot of things that I do put me into a flow state. And I do believe that a flow state...

(01:21:51):

Now when I talk about a flow state, I'm talking about something that you do that you are so passionate about and you are so enmeshed in that moment of doing whatever, and it's usually something with my hands for me, that I lose track of time. I can be doing something and I'll look up and it's literally three hours later and I had no idea. So when you're in a flow state like that, you're obviously not thinking about the past, you're not thinking about the future. You're just in the present moment. So to me, that is similar or akin to meditation.

Nate Hagens (01:22:24):

So yeah, a good part of your weekly chores could probably, relative to the average person, be described as meditation. Actually there's a Vipassana center 30 miles from where I live, and I had signed up for one of those 10-day things and then my friend was like, "Vipassana, those are hardcore. They'll take your car keys when you check in and you can't get out." I'm like, "What? Really? I don't know about that." But I intend on finding time to do something like that. I think you're absolutely right. If we spend more time being and less time doing, it frees our mind and builds up the discipline to avoid some of the consumptive consensus trance impulses in our current messed up culture. I would agree with that.

(01:23:23):

But Daniel, you've obviously thought about the issues surrounding The Great Simplification for much of your life and connected the dots. What salient discreet advice or recommendations do you have to the listeners who are aware of the global meta crisis at this time?

Daniel Zetah (01:23:46):

I need to say this quickly, what you call The Great Simplification, I've been call calling The Great Humbling for quite some time, and I believe it's the same thing. We are very quickly coming to a point of reckoning where we have to reckon with what we've

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done and the fact that we have squandered this one time energy pulse in such a silly, silly way, just the failure of imagination that took to get us to where we are is just mind boggling. But as far as, what do I tell other people? Simplify now and beat the rush. I can't tell you how many of my urban friends, and I have fewer and fewer urban friends every year. It seems like the vast majority-

Nate Hagens (01:24:47):

Why is that?

Daniel Zetah (01:24:47):

Well, for one because I get a lot of people, and I'll tell you actually. So every single urban person I've ever befriended has come out to our farm and they've said, "Man, when the shit hits the fan, I'm going to come live here." And to be honest, right then and there, I'm just like, "That sucks. That sucks that you're going to keep doubling down on all of the shit that you've ever done, not learning any practical skills whatsoever, making a bunch of money on frivolous shit in this system that is actively killing the planet, even though you know that it's wrong. And when this hits the fan, you're just going to rock up on my doorstep with no skills, no physicality whatsoever, and say, 'can I live here?' And you put me in a position like I'm Caesar with the thumb up or the thumb down." That's a shitty position to put somebody in.

(01:25:46):

And so yeah, I'm getting to the point where I have fewer and fewer friends that are living in urban areas unless they're willing to get out. Unless they actually want... If they want advice and they like, "Okay, I want to do this." I'm like, "All right, I'm going to be your buddy." Because I want to help everybody. I want to empower everybody to become a more sovereign individual. But if they're not interested in doing that until the collapse, no, I don't have time for that.

Nate Hagens (01:26:15):

What about young people? Do you change your advice for someone that's in their teens or early twenties? What sort of recommendations would you give to a young human listening to this program?

Daniel Zetah (01:26:28):

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The first thing I tell young people is, if your future plans look anything remotely like what your parents did, you're doing the wrong thing. Honestly, if you're paying attention at all, you have to recognize that we are in a position that we've never been in as a species and it's dire. We need radical changes to get enough resiliency to ride this wave that is coming behind us. And if you are not actively choosing something radical like, "I'm not going to go to college. I'm not going to get myself into a huge amount of debt. I'm going to instead go learn and work on farms to be able to learn how to grow food. Learn how to identify plants. Learn how to build something, to do anything with your hands." If you're not doing those things, you're setting yourself up for failure. You're setting the entire species up for failure.

(01:27:34):

So yeah, it sounds really critical and it is, but damn, the time for playing around is over, folks. We need to get serious about this. And I don't want people to do it because they feel like they have to do it. I also want to show people what they've been doing isn't working. Most people that I know in this system are unhappy as hell, and yet they keep signing up for it. Stop. Stop the insanity. Only you can stop it.

Nate Hagens (01:28:10):

What do you care most about in the world, Daniel?

Daniel Zetah (01:28:12):

I care most about life in general. I do believe that what we've inherited as an environment, as an ecology, as earth, as our planet is so unique. I mean, yeah, there's probably billions of other planets somewhere in the universe that probably have something similar to this, but we don't know them and we're never going to know them. The fact is that we live on a planet that is perfectly balanced as far as climate and conditions for us and for all other life forms that are alive right now evolved in these current parameters. And we're whacking that out to the point that everything is going to be struggling at best or dying at worst. So yeah, my biggest love is for life.

(01:29:10):

But your next question, Nate, is going to be what are you most scared of, probably?

Nate Hagens (01:29:17):

Yeah.

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Daniel Zetah (01:29:17):

And my biggest fear is that we're going to just continue with business as usual until we have a collapse of biodiversity and life on this planet. And actually, my biggest, biggest fear is that we're going to do that and we're going to continue living and we're going to live in this dead world. We're going to find some way to engineer ourselves to the point that we can live survive, but we're going to survive without all of the beauty and all of the life around us.

Nate Hagens (01:29:53):

Thank you for that. I agree with you. I'm headed in that direction. I'm trying to collect as many pieces of the problem set as possible and work towards responses. And this episode, there are a lot of ideas to help people get started. So thank you, to be continued, my friend.

Daniel Zetah (01:30:13):

Thank you, Nate.

Nate Hagens (01:30:15):

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