The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] Jonathan Rowson: I do believe that the metamodern sentiment takes you beyond critique and that you begin to see the enemy as more human. And you begin to see that while there are some people who are just callous liars and bastards, frankly, mostly that's not the case. Mostly there are people trying to get through the day.

And when you see them at that level as parents, sometimes as artists in their spare time, sometimes as chess players, it's much easier to connect with them and say, they're often like, I don't know what to do. I've got this job, I've got this family, I'm caught in this, you know, caught in this system. I think you have to get the conversation to that level.

More as meeting as equals, recognizing we're all somehow, to a greater or lesser extent, complicit.

[00:00:46] Nate Hagens: Today, I'd like to welcome Jonathan Rowson to the program. Jonathan is the co founder and director of UK based Perspectiva, which is a research organization examining the relationship between complex global challenges and the inner lives of human beings. Jonathan is an applied philosopher with degrees spanning a range of humanities and social sciences.

He is also a chess grandmaster and British champion, and also the author of several books, including Dispatches from a Time Between Worlds. This was an engaging conversation. We touched on themes frequently brought up in the show, such as the metacrisis, metamodernism, what it means to live and reside in the post tragic.

we discuss how the average human can learn and think about navigating the human predicament. I hope you enjoy and learn from this conversation with Jonathan Rowson. Jonathan Rowson, welcome to the program. I feel like I've made it, Nate, to finally be here. Thank you. This is our first time ever speaking.

And I've known of you and your work since I read the the essay, Tasting the Pickle, 10 Flavors of the Metacrisis. How long ago was that? A couple, three years?

[00:02:05] Jonathan Rowson: Four, roughly four years when I wrote it. Yeah. Middle of COVID survival writing.

[00:02:11] Nate Hagens: Ha, I follow a lot of people on Substack you're one of the few people that I actually take time to read when something comes out because you have a really wide boundary perspective on things and you're quite wise.

so why don't we start by you introducing yourself. What is your current work? you're, an editor or you work at something called Perspectiva. maybe just unpack what you're doing now, how you got here and your, worldview.

[00:02:44] Jonathan Rowson: Well, roomy question. Okay, so yes, my current day job is that I'm the co founder and chief executive of an organization called Perspectiva, and technically that's a charity in England and Wales.

I live in London and we describe ourselves as a community of expert generalists. We're interested in what it means to be good at being a generalist, and we speak about the desire to understand in theory and in practice the relationship between systems, souls, and society. And by that we mean we're very interested in integration and synthesis.

We're interested in the connection between the exterior world of complex systems, the economy, ecology, technology, and so on, but also the interiority of the human being, the psyche, the soul, the spirit, and how that plays out in society. The metaphors, the images, the language, the discourse. And my intuition some years ago was that One of the major problems with the public conversation is that these three fundamental features of reality rarely co arose.

They were rarely allowed to find each other and sort of mingle. So perspectiva was created partly to create that kind of conversation and that was now seven or eight years ago. And I'll sort of, rather than go back all the way, if I start from the beginning that my sort of Claim to fame probably, or my USP is that I played chess professionally for many years.

I was a, chess grand and British champion for a while, and I briefly worked with the former world champion Vish Anand, and I got to know the top of the chess world quite well. And I think that informs my view of the world in lots of ways, which we can maybe come back to. And then I studied a bunch of things, as people do, but with no particular intentionality.

I just sort of stumbled from one thing to the other. I did some, social science work, some humanities work. I ended up doing a PhD on the concept of wisdom, what it means to become wiser. and then I got a job in public policy research. And I realised there, this was at the Royal Society of Arts in London, that if if you could raise funds for something, if you could intellectually sell an idea, saying this is important, we need to look at this, then you could pretty much do what you wanted.

So I ended up doing quite a lot of work on climate change, quite a lot of work on spirituality, particularly the public awkwardness around discussing fundamental matters of the nature, meaning and purpose of life, alongside our most, our biggest collective action challenge. And I began to realise that while these were quite different in one way, they were both about the same thing.

somehow making contact with reality. They were both a kind of Eros. They were both like, what's going on? Who are we? How do we live? And in that context, I was lucky to meet, I think one of your previous guests, I'm not sure, Thomas Bjorkman, who gave me enough runway to leave my organisational job before I could start raising funds myself to create Perspectiva and make it viable.

That was about 2016. And in that time, we've taken form, we've become a publisher, so we've published now seven books. the most recent was quite prestigious, Ian McGilchrist's The Matter With Things. we have quite a few more books in the pipeline. LBW you published The Matter With Things? KM We did, although I should also say with all due humility, that we were there to catch it when it fell.

I mean, it was more, Ian had already done all the work.

[00:06:07] Nate Hagens: I have

both, volumes in the other room. I'm, three and a half percent my way through it. Long way to go. No,

[00:06:16] Jonathan Rowson: it's

a, momentous read and really, you know, world's historical kind of work and I love it.

Not,

[00:06:22] Nate Hagens: to play favorites, but of, the 120 episodes I've recorded, my one with Ian is either my favorite or among the top three.

Right.

[00:06:30] Jonathan Rowson: Well, yeah, I can imagine why. In addition to the publishing, we created an annual festival called the Realisation Festival. If anyone's not doing anything at the end of June, there's still some tickets for that this year. That's a kind of inquiry in a similar spirit. We call it a festival for the soul, but really we're dealing with the soul in this time of reckoning.

We also created the social. a practice called the anti debate. It's a new way of having public conversations. So the organization's moving along. Part of me feels like I'm winging it and making it up, but part of me feels like it's working. And I'm a, I'm a father of two kids for what it's worth. I'm a type one diabetic.

I'm Scottish. That's about it. Well, based

[00:07:13] Nate Hagens: on that intro, I am I'm shocked that it's taken two and a half years to get you on the program because the words you're saying are completely aligned with the philosophy of the show. but I'm also pleased that we're, finally speaking. So in no particular order, based on what you just said, what does it mean to be an expert generalist?

[00:07:38] Jonathan Rowson: I believe we have a, we have an, well, okay, I can define the term in a second, but let me give you the run, the sort of run up to it. Part of the way that modernity deals with knowledge is by fragmenting it and organizing it. and that's been the case now for many years. You get that with university departments, disciplines, sub disciplines.

So you get people who are more and more specialized. Indeed, someone joked that the problem with the academic world is, in effect, it's got a top of the class syndrome. And that top of the class syndrome is that the people who are top of the class in primary school love this feeling so much that they want to keep it.

And so they choose the subjects in secondary school where they can stay top of the class. And they love that feeling so much that when they go to university, they choose a subject where they excel. And they keep doing this ad infinitum until they remain the best at their field in the world. But in the process, they lose sight of virtually everything else.

Now, obviously that's a caricature, but it's, a heuristic as well. It explains something of what's gone wrong. Whereas the generalist is lumbered with the cliche of being a jack of all trades and master of none. But in a time of relative turmoil, When things are relatively stable, you actually really value the expertise of precise and detailed understanding in one domain, and I'm not knocking that for a second.

But in times of relative flux, where how we know what we know, what we need to know, what we need to do, how we need one field to inform the other, how different kinds of discipline inform different kinds of practice, this is a time of the generalist. This is a time where you really need to be good at synthesis, But for that, how do you do it with any degree of trust, any degree of competence?

And that's where the idea of expert generalist comes in. What does it mean to be an expert generalist? It means to have a degree of epistemic agility based on at least understanding at least one thing as an expert. I see it as a precondition of being an expert generalist that you know expertise from the inside.

It could be in guitar playing. It could be in looking after dogs. It could be in energy economics. It could be in. climate change. It could be in chess, it could be in parenting, but there's something you know from the inside where you say, yeah, I would say that I've put my quote unquote 10, 000 hours into that, and I, really know this thing.

And through that, You have a nose for what sounds like competence and expertise elsewhere. Enough that you know what to begin to trust, what kind of questions to ask, the kinds of knowledge you need, the kind of knowledge that's missing, the

framing issues, moving from one field to the other, understanding that worldviews and frameworks will actually delimit what you can and can't see, and you often don't know what you need to know, and so on.

So the expert generalist I have got a pithy paragraph somewhere that I've forgotten, but I can ping that to you later on. But it's basically somebody who is it's a way of taking generalist understanding seriously and trying to give it a bit of institutional and societal respect. And because the problem with generalism is, has no status or status, as you'd say.

and that's really a problem today because we need generalists, but they're not given any kudos basically.

[00:11:00] Nate Hagens: I, fully agree. And to use Ian's language, you said generalist is a jack of all trades and master of none, so, Reductionist expertise is the master and being a generalist is the emissary in our culture.

and could that change or is the reward incentive structure in universities, particularly, but more broadly in the workforce, does it naturally reward, specialization and experts. And, there are very few jobs that you know, other than a librarian or a hedge fund manager maybe that, that pay someone to be a generalist.

What are your thoughts?

[00:11:42] Jonathan Rowson: MG That's right. Well, it's a lovely flip on the Iain understanding because in a sense, in terms of Iain's hemispheric hypothesis, the perception of the whole and the good reading for context. and the capacity to focus on the particularity of something, not just to apply an algorithm or a method, but to really see the details of one particular thing, is the quality of the quote unquote master, the right hemispheric disposition. And then you need, once you've got that's the moment for, now I need an expert on this. That's where you say to emissary, I need to find somebody who understands this kind of detail of theoretical physics, please. Because without that, I don't know if my theory of time is working, and I don't know if, then I can't be sure if what I'm trying to say sociologically about time is going to make any sense.

You know, that kind of thing. so you need that quality of grasping the whole to know what kind of details you need. In terms of your question, It's connected to the feeling that, well, universities are still very important culturally. They're particularly important in North America, I think. My sense is, my wife's an academic, I have many academic friends, I spend a lot of time interacting with universities in various ways, morale is quite low, I would say, in general.

University morale is quite low. And I think that's partly because they feel that they're not really allowed to ask the questions that they're drawn to. They're not really free and, you know, it's the promise of this enclave, cultural enclave, where great minds can pursue their interests no longer applies.

Now you have enormous administrative pressure, significant funding pressure, often quite a lot of departmental politics. and yes, you'll squeeze in a publication or two, but even there you have to deal with the peer review process and all that means. So I, feel, I don't know how to save the university system at all, but I have noticed that the people I admire more intellectually tend to be outside of it.

not always, but Ian's an example. You know, not easy to do Ian's work in a university because It traverses too many different fields.

[00:14:03] Nate Hagens: That is, just in addition to being at the heart of the human predicament the left brain, right brain, and just our psychology in general of how we've moved to a materialist understanding of our world and we're disconnected from nature.

But beyond the, content, the scholarship in that thing is. Unbelievable. And he's a hundreds and hundreds of references. I mean, that guy is, special. Um, so, so like I said, you have a sub stack

[00:14:37] Jonathan Rowson: what's it called? It's called the joyous struggle. that's my personal one, the joyous struggle.

And I have this perspective on my organization also has one.

[00:14:45] Nate Hagens: Yeah.Um, You write a lot about the metacrisis or polycrisis. Why do you prefer the term metacrisis and polycrisis? and, you know, what, are your thoughts on all that? Okay, well,

[00:15:03] Jonathan Rowson: I'm inclined to back up just a little bit because I'm conscious of your audience.

I've listened to some of your shows and I know your guests. I think what's free to

[00:15:13] Nate Hagens: back up as far as you like. Yeah. So,

[00:15:15] Jonathan Rowson: so it's like this I think there's really quite a big difference between metacrisis and polycrisis. I think it matters a lot. And I, think it's to understand why you need to understand something of conceptual practice.

The very idea of how terminology takes root institutionally and culturally and begins to shape mindsets, which shapes policies and so on. It really does matter that as you're trying to get some sort of macro diagnosis of the global predicament, that the terminology we choose is as precise as possible.

And in that sense, the difference between the prefix meta and poly might seem niche and kind of arcane, but actually, what one introduces the other ignores. So I'll try and explain what I mean by that. Poly basically means many, and it can mean more than one type of, that kind of many, but it typically just means plural, a number of things.

And I think in the theory of polycrisis, and there is quite a lot of theory, it's not just a random buzzword they're talking in terms of systems analysis and it's usually where at least three systems are in some sense out of whack, not working. And there's a sort of emergent property of that compounding effects that means you can no longer know through cause and effect relationships, how to intervene in a way that will solve any problems.

An example of that would be during the pandemic, where the health system, the economic system, and the education system became particularly intertwined. Schools were closed because of health reasons, businesses were closed because of

health reasons and then everyone felt the effects of that. That would be a sort of classic polycrisis.

These things are inextricably linked. It's not clear where you intervene to make a difference. But, and this is maybe where I hope I have something to add to the show that might be, well, maybe not new, but at least relatively unusual. It's to do with interiority. You know, I think when you, the risk of doing something like a superorganism analysis, looking at energy flows, and trying to understand the global macroeconomy as an it, as a system.

and I know you know, Nate, know there's more than that going on. There are human psyches, and there's culture, and so on. But at the same time, there is a kind of mentality there, a technocratic mentality, that means that the term polycrisis is picked off the shelf as, oh, I can use this conceptually, because it allows me to carry on talking at that technocratic level.

of the system as an it. Polycrisis doesn't really allow you to get inside what's going on. And what I mean by that, I mean that we're not, it doesn't help you deal with consciousness or emotion or the overall meaning and purpose of what's, what we're trying to do. It's still at the level of, there's a problem, let's try and fix it.

In that sense, it's very much part of the leadership mindset that says, nothing to worry about here, this is just one of many problems. We'll call it the polycrisis, but we'll still treat it like any other problem, right? But as you know, what's going on is several orders of magnitude more complex and difficult.

And for that, you need not only to stand back. The polycrisis does allow you to stand back and look at it, but it doesn't allow you to do two other things. One is to look within, and the other is to look beyond. And this is what the word meta gives us, that poly doesn't. Meta has multiple meanings. It's meant to have.

In Aristotle, it was typically just after, but it also can mean within, between, beyond. and it's also got this quality of oscillation, of moving between as well. So it's a very rich term, and that's also important because the problem is multifaceted. In fact, I call the Metacrisis a multifaceted delusion for that reason, because on the one hand, it's one thing.

It's ultimately our view of the world that's the problem. It's a deep delusion writ large. it manifests in terms of the economy, in terms of war, in terms of human relations, and so on. So what meta gives us is the capacity to look within the problem, and by that I mean the underlying story of the human being and the meaning and purpose of life that permeates society today, which doesn't give you the resources you need to contend with this kind of existential global predicament.

And there's more to say, but that's a good start to just get it going.

[00:19:50] Nate Hagens: That, that makes sense to me. I, actually, unless I'm interviewing someone that's known for using those terms, I use the term, the human predicament more often than not, but it, for the reasons you just said, it's why I don't like the word energy transition because it immediately conjures up, we just need to fix the energy stuff.

The transition ahead of us is our, in our relationships and our values in our interaction with nature within ourselves. I mean, it's so much more than just energy. so, so I think the reason I asked you that question is because your essay that I first read about the pickle made me think about that.

So how do you, on another layer, how do you experience. You yourself experience the metacrisis, or how do you feel it with quite

[00:20:43] Jonathan Rowson: a lot of dissonance would be the answer and I choose dissonance Enjoy. Yeah, because Joy, there is a joyful struggle and I'm grateful for my life and I'm blessed with quite a full life And I live in a street now in Putney here, which is, you know, relatively affluent part of London.

my kids go to school. We're all more or less healthy. The, you know, the government's not great, but on the other hand, the country's still more or less stable. We are, I would somewhat argue, a democracy, although of course it depends how you define that. So in a sense, I live a normal life, and I don't want to wish it away.

I'm not one of these people who say everything has gone to pot and everything must change overnight. I'm like, actually, I have quite a lot to lose. So on the one hand, at a personal level, I'm not ready to say modernity is necessarily ending, or

that democratic capitalism has utterly failed. So in terms of my lived experience, I've even got a conservative orientation in that way.

You know, the home and the family and the community is kind of alive for me. But if you ask me more intellectually, and a bit more to my Scottish roots, I do feel like there is this vast delusion that is playing out now and is getting worse and worse and as part of the preparation for this talk, one of your guests, I forget which one, spoke about the likelihood of what he called a socio economic heart attack.

I thought it was a nice line. Forget which guest it was. But then another one is just socio economic heart attack, quite likely, for the reasons that your viewers will be familiar with. World War III, not unlikely because compounding pressures of the system as a whole, giving rise to resource wars and military adventures, people not trusting democracy, authoritarian leadership, justifying itself through conquest, and so on.

And then you have all the more subtle problems of AI, and exactly where what those problems are as a whole conversation, but certainly a big shift in our capacity to make sense on the internet, the problem of misinformation likely to be something we're contending with and so on. So I do feel dissonance in the sense that I want life to carry on as it is in some ways, while also feeling simultaneously everything has to change.

And that's sort of how it shows up for me, mostly. There's one more way it shows up. if that's if I can say. It shows up spiritually in the sense that, you know, I'm not, I don't have any religious background. I didn't, my family wasn't religious. I didn't go to church or anything like that. But as part of the Metacrisis work, and as part of the research I alluded to earlier at the RSA, I have been interested in the sort of forms of spiritual practice and spiritual perspective that we have in what is mostly a liberal imaginary.

And you, In the North America, you're somewhat different culture, of course, but there's still this broadly individualistic public private separation. Some people believe in God, some don't, and that's kind of more or less how it is. But I'm quite interested in Given how difficult it is to actually see a way through, and you've done better than anyone at pointing out that conundrum, I'm interested in what a kind of transformative, transcendent, metanoia shift in overall worldview would look like.

And while I can't say that shows up for me I'm very far from enlightened I do have glimpses of a kind of, ah, Life could feel a bit different. there, there are some thin spaces in the world where I feel, ah, I don't really see things very clearly. 200 years from now, my worldview will look very silly.

So all of these things play out.

[00:24:52] Nate Hagens: I agree with almost everything you just said. I'm going to come back to the Metacrisis and some of your perspectives, but I do also follow you on Twitter. And once in a while, or more often than once in a while, you have a chess related comment. So you mentioned you used to be a grandmaster chess player.

Is that different than like tennis, where if there's someone who's better at tennis, they will beat the other player all the time, or is it, is there a lot of luck involved and how did chess help shape your worldview or, did it contribute to your understanding of the choreography in your mind of the meta crisis and the things that we're discussing?

[00:25:36] Jonathan Rowson: Well, I did write a book a few years ago called The Moves That Matter. a chess grandmaster on the game of life. And that was a long form answer to the question, what has chess taught you about life? and just say the grandmaster title is a lifelong title, thankfully. So if you earn it, you don't have to, you know, keep playing or anything like that.

You're always that. how do you earn that title? You basically have to get very good and then you have to prove that you're good in three tournaments where you have to play above grandmaster level. And then you have to have a rating, which is a kind of number given to you through an algorithmic process by the World Chess Federation that is a level at which the Grandmaster title kicks in.

So if you can both keep a that's, to make sure you don't just have three fluke results. So if you have three big results and one constant rating they're like, okay, you've met the bar and that's your Grandmaster for life. And after that, your rating can drop, and it often does. so. I think there is something like, I've lost track.

I'm a little bit out of a loop, but there's at least a thousand grandmasters in the world now. Although when I became one, it was more like a few hundred. but in terms of the big question well, there's a lot of things. first of all, there's the opponent. then there is your own mind and being aware of your own mind.

And then there's the constant mistakes that anyone makes who plays chess. Then there's the fact that there's multiple pieces doing different kinds of things. Then there's the fact that plans don't typically work out, because you can't see too far before a surprise hits you. so when you play these things out, I, the opponent, the presence of the opponent has given me a somewhat annoying trait of thinking of what the other side would say.

It can make me sound disloyal because, you know, sometimes a friend or my wife, Shiva or whatever, will come up to me and say, this person said this, and this. And I have to work really hard not to say, they kind of have a point, you know because I'm, you know, Trying to see it from their point of view.

and I, and chess has given me that chess has given me the, legitimacy of the opponent.

[00:27:52] Nate Hagens: And here you are, have an organization called Perspectiva, different perspectives, right?

[00:27:57] Jonathan Rowson: Maybe no accident. which is, you've got to be careful with mad relativism. You've got to be careful that say that, you know, it's not just anything goes, but once you realize that, you know, if you grew up differently, If you'd had different experiences, you would have thought something different too, you know.

If you know, people become conservative because they were brought up in conservative families, people become progressive likewise because of certain experiences. Once you sort of, once that penny drops, you just have to try and see people not primarily politically. See them, first of all, as human beings who, like you, fell into the world at some level with a certain circumstances.

and then through that formation, they develop their views that they have. It gives you a certain degree of sympathy even tenderness towards people when you, that's

what I feel at the chess board. It's like, I want to beat this opponent, you know, certainly when I was younger, very competitive, but there's also a degree of, they're just trying to do what you're trying to do, you know, and that has stayed with me.

so while I don't Well, I don't love fossil fuel barons. I do sometimes imagine, you know, if I was the Shell CEO trying to persuade my board of something, what, are my constraints? What can I do? What can't I do? That

[00:29:25] Nate Hagens: kind of thing. So, so let me build on that because that's something that you're known for.

And I wanted to talk to you about you are a champion of a philosophy or a way of thinking called metamodernism. And maybe you could just briefly describe your interpretation of the words modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism, and then get into why you think metamodernism is a useful way to think about the world and, the metacrisis.

[00:29:58] Jonathan Rowson: most people watching this will just watch this, but anyone who, whatever I'm about to say, however much I fumble it, there's a long form version of this, and it's online, called, you know, Metamodernism and the Perception of Context. And there you can see detailed paragraphs of each of these, but here's my verbal response.

Modern, you know, the word modern means, you know, basically new. It's to do with what is new, what is coming our way. Habermas spoke of it in terms of an orientation towards the future. Tracing the exact origins of modernism is tricky. There's several different ways of looking at it, and sort of early modernism, middle modernism, late modernism.

But you're talking about sort of 400 to 600 years of time, and we're still modern. And this is quite important that this any sort of sequence is not a simple like ladder with one thing leading to another. the former structures stay in the new structures. So while we're modern, we're still pre modern as well.

You know, there's still outposts of, I don't know, orthodox religion of various kinds, and, you know, there's the Taliban in Afghanistan, and there's, you know, all sorts of

sites of the pre modern. and often you'll find those same people with mobile phones and, you know, they're, they're in a more postmodern setup as well.

So what I mean by postmodern is, sometimes called like modernity on stilts. There are some people who think it's really just a different part of the modern. but typically the postmodernists are critique of modernity. It's saying that there's not one story, there's not one worldview.

This science, reason, and progress that people put their faith in works better for some than others. It has a shadow. That shadow includes colonialism, it includes slavery, it includes fossil fuels, it includes being energy blind. And that's part of the modern mindset. It's like, yes, go science, reason, progress, but you're like, hang on, what are you not seeing?

What is, you know, on whose backs is this being built, right? The postmodern mindset is the one that does that kind of critique work. The metamodern disposition is many things, but one way of understanding it is that it's a sort of reconciliation of the modern and postmodern mindsets. It's a way of recognizing modernity had a lot going for it, it still does quite grateful when you go to the dentist that you have an anesthetic before you have treatment.

you know, that kind of thing. it's valuable. The progress is invaluable. However, it does have a shadow and, we need to move beyond the naive acceptance that everything is progress and everything is good. but you don't want to get lost in perspective and critique. The challenge of moving beyond postmodernism is to give something other than the critique of modernism.

You have to somehow present a positive world vision. a place to go to, a set of ideas that you can believe in. And very often they'll bring some of the sense of drive and progress of modernity, but they'll also give that some texture and definition through the perspectives of modernity, of postmodernism.

So it'll say, think about that from a subaltern point of view, think of that from a feminist point of view, think of that from a racial point of view, and then we might be getting somewhere. So we're not throwing out the progress, we're just asking you to give it definition, and flesh it out, and give it some greater scope because of that.

It's a bit more than that, though, because as you bring those qualities to bear, it's quite roomy already. You can feel a kind of psyche, you know, playing with itself. And sometimes they call, you know, serious play would be quite a metamodern disposition. So on the one hand, you look like you're being frivolous, but actually you're really inquiring into something.

They sometimes speak about ironic sincerity or sincere irony as one of the metamodern qualities. And that's to do with the fact that you're so Saturated with perspective from the past that you can no longer speak as if you haven't spoken before. Umberto Echo gives a good example of this. He says, and this is on the postmodern, but I'll tell you in a minute.

It's also meta modern in some ways. Umberto Echo, of course great Italian academic literary theorist novelist man with maybe the best library in, in, in the world as well. He said there's a story of, He thinks of it as a man who loves a very sophisticated woman, and so he cannot say to her, I love you madly, because she has heard these same words several times before in Barbara Cartland novels.

There is a solution, however. What she needs to say is, as Barbara Cartland would have put it, I love you madly. Now, that would be postmodern. It's EO. I love you is modern, it's sounded like it's just the way things are. Saturated with perspective and history, postmodern critique, what Barbara Cartland would say it.

Metamodern would be, somehow you can say I love you, and the person you're talking to knows that your mind has just gone through that Barbara Cartland joke. But you've come out the other side, and you're like, no, I can be this. That's a real value. So what metamodernism gives you is a commitment to things like truth, beauty, and goodness again, and love, and so on.

These are real things, but you can no longer treat them completely innocently. you know, you don't stand in veneration of them. There's a little bit of irony and playfulness with them.

[00:35:42] Nate Hagens: Yeah, I want to talk more about that, but in the example you just gave, it presumes for metamodern thinking to scale or to have an effect.

There needs to be more metamodern thinkers that you talk to. Otherwise, the, love example you just said wouldn't have manifested. I mean, here's why I'm interested in it. there are a lot of problems with our world and they're accelerating. Um you've mentioned many of them climate change and what's accelerating their social inequalities lots of things.

And I think it's natural for humans to isolate a problem that they care about or feel threatened by and blame someone. I'm. I've lived through that period in my own life, and now I am trying to connect the dots of how things fit together, but not only deconstruct what happened with our society and our species and our cultural evolution the last few hundred years on the backs of armies of fossil workers, but to reconstruct what's possible and, forge some, even though they're blurry paths ahead, which I think requires us to suppress our identities, listen more, be playful, ask questions instead of just critiquing.

So help me understand the pathway to, get beyond critique towards some sort of a reconstruction, even if it's fuzzy and doesn't have all the details.

[00:37:29] Jonathan Rowson: The quick answer is experimentation.

It's difficult for me to speak on behalf of metamodernism as a whole, because there are multiple strains of metamodernism. I need to sort of lay that out before explaining what might follow for action. There's a kind of cultural cultural metamodernism, let's say, which has to do with recognising a multi a metamodern sensibility within art forms like films and books, where they notice that there's a return to real value.

You actually care about the characters. So, Seinfeld, for example, would not be metamodern. It's very postmodern. It's all critique. whereas something like And funny as

[00:38:16] Nate Hagens: hell, by

[00:38:17] Jonathan Rowson: the way. Funny as hell. I'd happily chill out and watch it. In fact, it's sometimes a relief just to be in that zone of completely unserious banter, let's say.

but it's, there's no, real depth to it, not really. There's no kind of ultimate, love, or truth, or beauty, or anything like that. It's all very surface. but there are many more films now where that's not the case. So one example would be you know, Don't Look Up is quite a meta modern, you know, film.

I don't know if you're familiar with it, but the, approaching asteroid. I loved it. Right. So that would be a very good example of metamorphic film, because on the one hand, it's absurd and ridiculous, and it has those kind of postmodern critiquing the world tropes, but there's also a character that you care about in the main scientist.

And then when they're having the dinner at the end, there's a real sort of somber reckoning of really, we really did have it all, didn't we? I think is the final line before the asteroid hits. and so there's some real dignity and sort of. tenderness to the film. That's a metamodern quality, but it's not naive.

It still recognizes the political corruption and the denialism and the crazy media. Those are part of the world, so it doesn't feel saccharine or sentimental. It takes all of that stuff and moves you beyond it. That's what cultural metamodernism analyzes, looks at artifacts like that, what's going on there.

You have a kind of political metamodernism, which is a bit more in the sort of Hansi Freynax school, which is to do with developmental theory. And that where you mentioned there about the population and how they see the world, they would actually advocate that we need sort of education at scale to develop the world population, to sort of understand things in a certain way, so that we can actually grapple with the problems that we have.

the benefit there is it's true. We need to grow into the complexity of our times. The risk is it can sound kind of crypto fascist and that you have to, you know, make people a certain way and force them to be free and so on. And then you have a more academic sort of social theory metamodernism with trying to actually change social theory beyond postmodernism.

And that's mostly Joseph Ananda Storm, I believe his name is. and then you have something like the kind of metamorphism I have, which is a bit more fluid. It's more of a kind of not being any of those camps, but sort of seeing them all. And it's

something to do with recognizing that modernity might be inexorably ending, but still somehow not entirely wanting to let it go.

So it makes you, you're not a doomster. There's also a doomer optimism camp. That's another story. you're not like, Oh my God, everything's collapsing. It's all terrible. Actually, there's a little bit of upbeatness to it. It's like, we live in utterly fascinating times. Dark, yes. We really might be stupid enough to destroy our only home.

Nonetheless, how fascinating to have to contend with problems of this magnitude. And when I say experiment, what I mean is. we're a bit beyond, you know, the kind of analysis, the kind of meta analysis which says, here's the global system, totalizing abstraction, this number of people, this number of governments, this amount of money, this much energy, what do we do?

because that's not where the agency is. There is no world government, there is no way in at that level. I believe the metamodern sensibility is much more localised, but more precisely, it's cosmo local. It's very much aware of the planetary sensibility, seeing ourselves as a kind of cosmos in the far reaches of space, but the action is often local.

And a local doesn't just mean your street level or your garden, it can also mean your digital community, what you have proximate to you. My favourite line of yours, Nate, so far, is where you said, on this runaway train, we have to find the dining car. I thought it was brilliant. Poetic brilliance. And that's kind of metamodern.

It's like, yes, things are going to hell in a handcraft and so on. Handcart, rather. But we've got to enjoy this one wild and precious life. And simultaneously, this is the metamodern mixed feelings. They come together. Yes, it's dark and difficult. Yes, it's hopeful and joyous. And so it goes on. And that's the quick answer.

I haven't told you what we do yet, but I'll give, take a breath, Brad.

[00:43:01] Nate Hagens: Okay. And let me ask a follow up to that. And then you can tell me what you do. so from a practical standpoint for those watching this show who are well versed in the global, problematique uh, to use a different term.

Um, and are either themselves or constantly interacting with others who are focused just on critique.

It's the fault of Exxon and Shell. It's the fault of the billionaires and the corporations or what have you. How would you experiment? What sort of advice would you give to listeners to playfully or experimentally move beyond that, that framing of, the metacrisis?

[00:43:50] Jonathan Rowson: move towards the body and relationships is the quick way of looking at it.

I'll give you two examples of that. you mentioned Shell and Exxon. When I was working at the RSA, working on climate change I managed to raise funds to do a climate constellations inquiry. I don't know if you know constellations therapy, but it's a, form of, sometimes it's called social presence in theatre.

In essence, somebody discloses in natural language what the problem is. They'll say, I'm trying to raise money, I can't raise money, nobody understands my argument for social change, what do I do? And then the room will kind of take the form of that. In this case, there was a climate person who was working in the climate field, saying she was having real difficulty with feelings of pain towards attacking the fossil fuel industry.

She felt it was somehow disingenuous. Her life depended on these. petrochemicals, and so on. And she didn't feel right that almost every day she was going to work as if they were the enemy and she was the saviour somehow. So the Constellator basically says, okay, let's play that out. So intuitively, without thinking too much, you choose someone to represent fossil fuel.

You choose someone to represent maybe the organizations you're working inside. Someone else might represent the media, the government, and so on. Then you lay it out in the room, and then you'll ask them, okay, Here are those people. Anything you want to add? And she'll add one or two things. And then the consulator will look at the room and ask the people who are already there.

Now, they're not doing role play. It's very important to understand that. They're not acting. They're asked to deal with somatic data. What's going on in their body

about how they feel? and they'll say things like, they know that this fossil fuel company is standing there, how do you feel about them looking at you?

And they'll say, I feel pretty uncomfortable. I prefer he turned around, and they turn around. And it goes on like that for a while until it settles. And the reason I'm sharing this is that when it settled, what happened was the fossil fuel company was there, and funnily enough, it was a tall white man, which was kind of like typecast fossil fuel baron.

And I remember thinking he looked like the pirate. And then they got the person who was playing the issue holder in the field. So they don't play it themselves, they choose somebody else to be them. And they got them to say, tell the consulator said, tell them, ask them to say, I am evil.

And the fossil fuel person said, I am evil. And then he said, how did that feel? And he said, bollocks, good British word, like nonsense. I'm not evil, right? He says, okay, Ask him to say, I am the past. He said, I am the past. He said, how did that feel? He said, better. About right. And this was a really kind of cathartic moment for the person who held the issue.

It was like, they're not evil, they're the past, right? We have to make them the past, help them become the past, right? Maybe they are evil too, but that's another footnote. But this is an example of actually, you know, doing something with theatre and bodies in the room. Second example we did a, an anti debate, one of Perspectiva's sort of inventions.

It's an attempt to explore an issue with multiple ways of knowing. And again, using space more intelligently, trying to be still intellectually rigorous as far as possible, but not relying merely on discussion. also working with metaphor, feelings movement, and so on. And we did one on climate change, and we asked, part of it is asking people to choose the question.

And then they sort of vote on the question, and they try and make the case for why we should discuss this thing. And what we ended up discussing, this is quite recently, was the contention, humanity is too weak to solve the climate crisis. Discuss, right? Humanity is too weak. And what was interesting about that was we chose to discuss it, not because people agreed, but 'cause some people vehemently

disagreed and they hated the question so much that they really wanted to go for it, and others were like, no, I think finally we're getting to it. This is really the problem. We are too weak to deal with this problem. And as an aside, Thomas Metzinger wrote a beautiful essay where he spoke called spirituality and Intellectual Honesty. It's freely available online where he says that we'll become aware of ourselves as failing beings.

a really evocative, haunting term, failing beings. But anyway, that was what the discussion became, and we allowed people to get into the sense of what do we mean by being too weak? Am I too weak? Are you too weak? Who's too weak? Is this really true? But it's different from just having a get the bastards conversation, right?

Because It doesn't entirely ring true. While you get the stats about a certain number of companies responsible for a certain percentage of the emissions, and you'll know these facts better than me, but, you know, they always ring partly true. They're very important because agency is not easily distributed, nor is responsibility.

There's not moral equivalence. Nonetheless, am I taking to the streets every day to complain about the fossil fuels that I'm implicated in. No, I'm living my life. Most people are. So it's not entirely right for me to say the problem is entirely with the fossil fuel companies. I can do what I can. I can divest my pension.

I can campaign. I can write my things. But somehow you, I do believe that the metamodern sentiment takes you beyond critique and that you begin to see the enemy as more human. And yeah, that's it. You begin to see that while there are some people who are just callous liars and bastards, frankly mostly that's not the case.

Mostly there are people trying to get through the day. And when you see them at that level as parents, sometimes as artists in their spare time, sometimes as chess players, it's much easier to connect with them and say, they're often like, I don't know what to do, I've got this job, I've got this family, I'm caught in this, you know, caught in this system.

I think you have to get the conversation to that level, more as meeting as equals, recognizing we're all somehow, to a greater or lesser extent, complicit, albeit some greater, admittedly.

[00:50:15] Nate Hagens: Well, your last sentence I fully agree with but let me ask you this so society has progressed from pre modern to modern and post modern and maybe some, somewhat meta modern in, the movie Don't Look Up you mentioned, is that progression map on to an individual human life as they mature and learn and become more wise and have experiences or not necessarily?

[00:50:43] Jonathan Rowson: So not necessarily. It's a common understanding. So the way you framed it there, first of all, even the initial premise I would question, it's not necessarily progress. I mean, the very idea of progress is quite a modern sentiment. Some would say in the context of Your Great Simplification, progress may well be one of the ideas that we have to hospice, you know, we have to sort of let go.

And there can be different kinds of progress, of course, but the sort of societal, the idea that things are getting better and better, that's precisely what we're realizing isn't the case, that was always a partial truth. I

[00:51:24] Nate Hagens: don't know that you've, read it, but Daniel Schmakenberger and the, um Civilization Research Institute team have a new long paper out on, on naive progress versus authentic progress, unpacking the point exactly that you just made.

[00:51:40] Jonathan Rowson: Okay, great. No, I haven't read that, but it rings, true. And I, In the context of an individual life, it's also true that these things, they're more like overlapping qualities. so the world remains pre modern, post modern and metamodern all at the same time. Likewise, in an individual psyche, you know, the part of me that goes to the bank is still quite modern.

and the part of me that goes to the debate and critiques the opposition is relatively post modern and so on. But there is nonetheless some developmental aspect to this. There is something about the one of Perspective's premises is that a new sensibility is arising. I do believe that's the case, and that sensibility can be called Meta Moden in that people are kind of reckoning with, we can't go on like

this at a global scale, but they're also recognizing there is no operative agency at the global level that will allow us to respond to our reckoning.

And so. our default way of functioning day by day is no longer fit for purpose. And so then what? How do we actually collaborate together, experiment together, influence powers that be, change the nature of power, maybe create a parallel polis? these kind of things.

[00:53:05] Nate Hagens: So, so what would be possible if more people developed that way of looking at the world and interacting with others in contrast to if the facts about our, global pickle continue to get worse and we just critique it louder and louder critiques how, how do we get out of that loop and what might be possible if more people start to think that way?

Things are possible.

[00:53:34] Jonathan Rowson: and by that I mean, I'm not inclined to despair. I do recognize objectively we are in a pickle, quite, quite a significant one. The way I try to get around it is that critique should co arise with vision and method. And I try not to allow critique to come by itself for too long without vision and method, its buddies coming along.

Vision, of course, is something to do with where you want to get to. And that's tricky today because that will always be contested. You know, it's not like one vision is going to seduce the whole eight billion plus population. It's going to play out differently. And this is one of the challenges with our desire to see the system, the global system as a whole.

We need, the work you do is invaluable, don't get me wrong. You absolutely do need to see how we're doing in terms of energy, and economy, and debt, and all of the things that you allude to at a total system. However, you need to remember that the total system is only one frame, and that there's also a kind of pluriverse of multiple cultures with different kinds of institutions.

and there is scope for change that's more localized. I think the danger is, because we're used to living our own life in terms of, if there's a problem, I'm responsible for

fixing it, when we switch the scale and go to the global, we think something similar applies. Big problem, what's the solution? But it's a kind of category error.

That really, while the totalizing abstraction is important information, it's not the arena for our agency. The arena for our agency is inherently more localized, and the challenge is to coordinate the local action at scale. And that's a big difference, I think.

[00:55:26] Nate Hagens: So building on that, you've coined a term called collective individuation which my understanding is you pulled from Carl Jung's work on individuation and Eleanor Ostrom's work on collective action.

can, is this the time to explain that? And can you break that down for us?

[00:55:44] Jonathan Rowson: Okay. so I'm not sure I coined it. I forget the original source, but just in case, I'm not making it, but I've certainly brought it into being a little bit in our network. Individuation is relatively straightforward. it's a union notion to do with becoming who you're meant to be.

And it's, a sort of stage of life where you free yourself from societal, society's kind of influences and find your own voice and, um somehow degree of integration in the soul arises. So it's becoming an individual, but it's more than just individual as opposed to collective. It's being a person.

It's really in, in Carl Roger's sense, it's becoming a person. What's different about collective individuation is that it insists on linking that process of personal individuation, which is a kind of psychological and spiritual work, to a cultural and sociological context. So Elinor Ostrom is very important when it comes to problems relating to Moloch, or collective action problems, or game theoretic problems.

Because Elinor Ostrom's work is really a kind of can do attitude. Yes, there are collective action problems, but there are also collective action solutions. And if you become less abstract about it and look at what people actually do in practice, often these apparently Insurmountable challenges can, are dealt with through a kind of trust and trade-offs and rituals and so on.

now what I mean by linking Carl, you and Eleanor Ostrom is that I feel that what's called for today is not everyone doing their own thing. in terms of, you know, that's my life, that's your life, good for you, you do you, I'll do me, that sort of thing. That's only partly true. There's something about finding out who you are and living the life you're meant to live.

But I think it has to be responsive to the historical, ecological and cultural context we find ourselves in. And that's quite a different contention. Then the question is not, who am I? The question is, what am I called upon to be? And, what is my unique opportunity here? Given my background, given my talents, given my relationships, given my affordances, my opportunities, what can I do that helps?

And that is a question leading towards individuation, but it's collective in the sense that it's responding to the milieu that you're part of. So that's what I mean by collective individuation.

[00:58:14] Nate Hagens: Which is a different way of saying I'm trying to get a lot of people on this channel to understand the global predicament and play a role once they see the road and the landscape, then play a role according to their affordances.

Like you said I mean, that's, that's why I really enjoy speaking with people like you, because I'm trying to individuate people. Given my view of the circumstances, the unbelievably scary and complex circumstances that we face, but then I find someone else that's doing the same thing and I feel like the burden is lessened somewhat.

Just by interacting with that person. And then if there's 10 people it's, it scales. And so I think that is something that feeling and you're labeling a collective individuation relative to the meta crisis is exactly what we need to happen globally to some degree.

[00:59:16] Jonathan Rowson: I feel so. I also feel it's an antidote to despair.

You know, it's an antidote to the idea of the problem is too big. Nobody's doing anything about it. I can't do anything about it. Really, our job, I think, is to find our work, not to ignore the context. It's very important we orient to the metacrisis, the

planetary predicament, but at the same time recognize that's not actually our arena as such.

That's our context. Our arena is somewhere else. And the question is, and, how do we find our own work, informed by the work, informed by that predicament. And I do feel more people are beginning to do that. which gives me some encouragement as well.

[00:59:58] Nate Hagens: So, before we hit record on this, Jonathan, we were talking about how difficult the circumstances are and that this can be a lonely road and we didn't evolve, to handle this amount of stress about the world every single day.

How do you manage to have a life and a wife and kids and um, chores and things, and also work on this metacrisis space? How, do you, manage that and the cognitive dissonance involved?

[01:00:33] Jonathan Rowson: Well, there's quite a lot of multitasking. I'm laughing because my headphones are on, and when you mentioned chores, you know, there's a fair amount of dishwasher while listening to The Great Simplification, for example.

and there's you know, I actually think of, you know, tasks I can do where I can, you know, stay attuned while doing things. But more generally, I think it's just quite important to get a good feeling for your own responsibility, because you can't, you know, you can't really carry the weight of the world.

I'm not sure you're meant to. I think it's quite a recent phenomenon through initially the internet, but particularly the internet enabled smartphone and then social media, that we carry in our pocket the world's problems. And also, because of muscle memory and habit formation and algorithms and addiction and so on dopamine responses and everything else, we end up checking a lot.

Oh my God, there's the problem, there's the problem. And not just that, but we get a lot of status anxiety. Look at those people who are really doing something important. I'm not doing anything important. Now, I'm not immune to any of that. I feel all of that, but I also see the absurdity of it. And I think it's quite important to

be around people who will challenge you to do your best, but will also thank you for doing your thing.

And to be encouraged by, you know, I can say to you, I think very clearly you're doing your thing. And it's there's something charismatic and beautiful about that. When you find your work and you're, you know, doing the thing that you alone are well placed to do. It's a blessing, and I wish that for everyone.

and when you find that, it's a bit easier to have a life, because you no longer feel your life is solving the metacrisis, which you can't possibly do. which anyway, doesn't have a solution, but that's another, conversation.

[01:02:24] Nate Hagens: Thank you for that both the honesty and calling out my own situation.

which you did correctly, I think two years ago. I never would have anticipated that two years on, I would be doing this podcast alternated with my little, frankly, riffs and reflections and doing presentations and connecting people around the world. And it does actually feel like this is what is mine to do.

so I, will carry on. So getting back to the, individual observation of you carry the world's problems in your pocket. How helpful do you think, I believe it was Mark Gaffney, came up with the original framing of the pre tragic, the tragic, and the post tragic? Maybe you could briefly redefine that and tell me if you think that's useful framing or do you incorporate that into your life and your work?

[01:03:22] Jonathan Rowson: Yeah, so I first came across this through Zack Stein and I think Zack and Mark together developed the idea. And they speak of it as stations of the self, I believe. So it's not a conventional developmental model in which you kind of go through stages. It's more like it's an existential analysis of, the individual's disposition towards life.

And in order to, it's not a judgment about the relative value of these things. So it's important to feel it's not like you're trying to achieve post tragic. Um pre tragic is perfect if you're a baby and you're giggling and you're in your mother's arms and you have the food you need. Be pre tragic.

All for it, right?

[01:04:09] Nate Hagens: Tragic.

[01:04:09] Jonathan Rowson: Or,

[01:04:10] Nate Hagens: watching Seinfeld.

[01:04:11] Jonathan Rowson: Or, well, yeah, later in life maybe, but yeah. When you're if you lose a loved one if you lose your favorite tree, if you if your pet dies, if you have heartbreak, then be tragic. You know, there's a case for catatonic depression. No one would recommend that, but there's a, you know, there's a time where tragedy hits you and you're meant to feel it, and that's normal.

But these are not places that are the truest, let's say. They're true at certain points of life, but I think what is more fully true, closer to the whole truth, is something like the post tragic, which is where the energy of the pre tragic and the kind of positivity of it and the love of life contained in it is informed by the darkness and the reality of the tragic, which after all is really about a statement that life matters, that there are things worth caring about, that there is meaning here.

And it carries that meaning into the post tragic, which is where life is darker, heavier, more real, but it's still broadly something that you're glad to live and engage in. I find it quite handy as a notion

[01:05:27] Nate Hagens: for what it's worth. I do too, and actually that was a, beautiful description of it that I hadn't heard that framing.

I think those of us working in the metacrisis space and many of the listeners and watchers of this program probably would agree that the, buffeting of world events with Israel and Iran and Russia and climate and new temperature records and all the other things that we yo between the post tragic and the tragic on a daily basis sometimes, which isn't all that healthy.

so how do you reside mostly in the post tragic? What are some techniques or practices that, you've. come up with, or what do you have to say about that?

[01:06:17] Jonathan Rowson: A couple of things. So the first is, in addition to the yo yoing, there's also the problem of the sort of techno optimist pre tragic vibe that you leave, you go online and you, or you watch what's salient on YouTube.

There's a lot of people who do feel that, you know, civilization is doing wonderfully well and look at how AI will solve all our problems and make everyone fabulously wealthy and solve our energy problems and so on. And that's wearisome because it doesn't ring true in it. it sort of distracts attention from what needs to be done.

also, I think it's important to say that there's different kinds of tragedy. I mean, I have had some degree of tragedy in my life, but I, would even hesitate to say I am post tragic because I'm not sure, touch wood, that I've had that, you know, had people die that are close to me and I've, had heartache and, you know, I know a bit of tragedy, but I also know people who have read real, tragedy and, you know, lives have utterly fallen apart.

but insofar as, You want to get to a state of being that allows you to live well, which I think is a given, and one that is real and not fake. You're looking for something that can contain the darkness of life, contain the vivid and frankly disturbing diagnosis of the world's predicament, but not allow it to floor you and debilitate you.

So you're clear sided about it, but simultaneously able to function. And that does require a degree of, well, let's say, agility with your attention. You have to be careful what you attend to and when and for how long. There's a time to look clear sidedly at the apparent impossibility of changing the future.

Yeah. macroeconomic system in time to avert ecological collapse. But there's a time to look into the eyes of your loved one or go to the park with your child or your dog. And a lot of this is about what you attend to, you know, you are what you attend to at some level.

[01:08:30] Nate Hagens: So, let me ask you a personal follow up to that.

You've mentioned several times um, already that local as opposed to global is, is probably the, correct direction. So, do you have these conversations about the meta

crisis and some of the existential angst we've been discussing locally or regionally where you live or mostly on your online?

network, because I, don't, I have a huge network internationally, like people like you and Thomas Bjorkman and Daniel Schmachtenberger, but I've tried locally and largely failed so far.

[01:09:07] Jonathan Rowson: MG It's interesting, isn't it? It's interesting that, you inhabit that world and you find just, you can't communicate to others what you're thinking and doing.

I do try. depending on who I'm with. I often speak in terms of being interested in how things connect, and that people can respond to you at that level. I'm interested in most people study one thing. I'm quite interested in how one thing connects with another, and that's my job, and I try and think about that, and I write about that.

But when it gets a bit more involved, it's to do with, I ask them questions like, well, you've heard of climate change, for example. How do you think we'll manage to deal with that? And then it begins to come out, or you'll say, you know, what are your feelings about AI? You can ask your hairdresser or your person at your local shop, and they they won't always be ready for that conversation, don't get me wrong, but sometimes after a few preliminary remarks, over the weeks of seeing you, they get curious.

What do you do, sir? You know, what's the All that kind of stuff. But I do agree with you that there's something very curious about this work we do that once you get it, it's hard to be anywhere else. One way I understand it is in terms of the Three Horizons model, that a lot of people in the liminal web are effectively living in the Third Horizon.

their day to day life's on the first horizon, they manage their affairs, and they speak to other people who are interested in innovation and a lot of political discussions about what's happening in innovation. But their heart is already in the third horizon. They're already trying to live a different kind of world and orienting towards that.

And that means that our concerns are just quite different from day to day concerns of people who don't go there as often. it was quite interesting when Daniel visited London, actually. A couple of my neighbours came to the event that I hosted with Daniel Schmackenberger and quite varied responses.

Some were like, wow, what an amazing galaxy brain, how brilliant. And others were like, he made no sense to me whatsoever. I was left not sure what he was saying. And I don't feel lonely though. I feel When you begin speaking about these things, there's usually a way in. You know, sometimes it's the language of love, sometimes it's the language of climate, sometimes it's the language of education.

and then people will tell you their story, you tell them theirs, and so it goes on. slow work, slow gradual work, but I feel it's coming somehow. No, just that it's, I feel there's a bit more appetite for that kind of conversation. and it's more like people find you than you just bump into them. You know, they hear you randomly online somewhere, or you're on a radio program.

Like on Friday, I'm doing, I was invited to speak about Robert Persig on BBC Radio 4. and as a result of that interview, someone will probably hear me. And so I read that book, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, years ago. And then you might get into a conversation about, and what do you think of it now?

And is it relevant today? And

[01:12:17] Nate Hagens: probably the the thing that I've learned the most on this podcast that was surprising to me is how different people are. around the world. You mentioned people's reactions to Daniel. I've heard that as well. every week I do most weeks I do a frankly, which are not scripted.

I just sit down with some notes and I record the one coming out this week is some uh, thought experiments around Earth Day. And I have like 10 people in my inner circle that, that watch them to make sure I don't get in trouble by posting them online. And. Almost every week, two people hate it and eight people love it, but it's different and for different reasons.

And some people this morning in the feedback, they loved the solar panel thing. and others didn't and others that was their, The only part they didn't like. And so

it's, fascinating to me, the wide disparity of temperament and emotion and philosophy and ways of learning with the different humans around the world, which is why I think your work at Perspectiva and this meta modern framework is so important because we need to have a social discourse that cuts through the AI and the bollocks online and other things.

Do you have any thoughts on that? I do. I mean,

[01:13:50] Jonathan Rowson: I share that feeling of how extraordinary there's a, in Yorkshire in the UK, they have this expression, there's nowt queer as folk. It's a very Yorkshire way of putting it. Nowt queer as folk. There's nothing as strange as people, roughly translated.

And and I, I agree with that. It's quite beautiful after a while, just how particular everyone is. In terms of the metamodern sensibility, and so on. My colleague Ivo Mensch, who's a former Zen monk, and now doing a lot of theoretical work for Perspectiva, thinking how we apply and practice some of our premises about what's happening in the world.

He has a lovely line that our challenge in an age of AI is to make consciousness relevant. To make consciousness relevant. I find that quite intriguing. It's I'm not sure about you know, artificial general intelligence, and whether there'll ever be anything like conscious AI or not. I doubt it, personally, but I could be wrong.

I do believe that, at least for some time, the fact that we have consciousness is distinctly it's not distinctly human. We have consciousness and language and all that comes with that. And I think the beauty is in, what do we do with that? Like, how do we find Someone said consciousness is not just a thing out there, it's the inside of the whole world.

The inside of the whole world. And this is why, when you did one of your Frankleys, Nate, quite a recent one about I want to speak to you about Lord of the Rings in passing, but first of all, the other Frankley was where you said one of the things you're sure will not happen, you're 100 percent sure, is God is not going to save us, right?

And I knew what you meant, so it's not like I disagreed as such. But I also, when I heard it, I thought, ah, I'd want to parse that a bit, because it's not as though there's going to be a crack of lightning and a man in the clouds will say, I'll save everything, guys, no problem. On the other hand, I do think that when people say transformation and consciousness, these big words, I don't find it absurd.

I don't find it wishful thinking. I do think it's kind of the work. You know, at some level, we need to become different kinds of human beings with a different mind and a different metaphysics, even. A different sense of what time is, and what causality is, and what space is, and our sense of causation, and so on.

And I don't think that happens in the way that policy happens. I think it happens culturally over a period of time, and there's a practice element to that. You have to lead the way with certain forms of practice. And that's what I mean by when you said that I wasn't so sure. It's like, it's not that God will save us, but rather, if we get some clear orientation to the earth, our relationship to reality, that may save us in some

[01:16:37] Nate Hagens: way.

Well, that was my intent. The whole thing was a thought experiment, but, let's, let's return to that episode. It was 17 things I'm 100 percent certain about. I'm curious as a follow up, is there anything that you're absolutely or largely certain about, and how did you come to feel that way?

[01:17:00] Jonathan Rowson: It was a good question because I, I was, I noticed that you were going to ask this and I I'm not sure.

I'm not by nature that certain about things. I am quite, it's again, the chess player in me is a little bit on the one hand. On the other hand I, I did write something. It's a good place. It's a good place to be.

[01:17:19] Nate Hagens: Right.

[01:17:21] Jonathan Rowson: Well, did, I did I did write something called Perspectiva in 10 Premises, which is my attempt to sort of lay out the organization's kind of turf, as it were, like this is, these are the things we're interested in.

And that can be found online, but, it includes a description of, you know, borrowing from Zack Stein, that we're in a time between worlds. I think there was a sense in which modernity is giving way to something else and either through collapse or through some kind of transformation, there'll be a different kind of world before long.

100 percent certain though? I don't think so. what I'm 100 percent certain of, I think, is that our, future, Viable and desirable futures depend upon a fundamental shift in our relationship to reality. I'm 100 percent sure of that. I don't think we can survive and thrive with our current mind, our current mindset.

I do think we have to reorient to what kind of organism we are, what we're living for, how we seek meaning, what cosmological purpose is, why this planet is here, what consciousness is for, what kind of value is there, how do we approach it and appreciate it, what goodness, truth and beauty are. I think unless we can grapple with these questions, now it's not like eight billion people will do that, but unless sufficient number of people can shape the culture such that these kind of questions again animate the human endeavor, then I think some kind of collapse or authoritarian dystopia is likely.

[01:19:04] Nate Hagens: So you may have just answered my next question, which is what, is the work you're doing at Perspectiva? And if you're successful, what, might be the result of it?

[01:19:14] Jonathan Rowson: Well, as you know, we're in the in the runaway train, in the dining car here, and there's hopefully a growing size, this dining car, and plenty of people in it.

so it's very much not just for Perspectiva, but insofar as I feel we have a responsibility. Those 10 premises lay it out, and uh, as I say, my colleague is trying to turn that into practice forms, but I've tried to make it more succinct, and my succinct version is what I call the flip, the formation, and the fun.

So I feel our contribution is to try to achieve. over time, the flip the formation found. What does that mean? The flip is what I just mentioned. It's a paradigmatic shift in our relationship to reality. It borrows on a theory from his name suddenly escapes me, but there's a book called The Flip by this author, and his name will

come back to me in a minute, where essentially we recognize that ontological primary, a fundamental feature of reality.

And that changes our perspective. perspective on virtually everything. But even if you don't go that way, even if you just want to say we have a new attitude, a new epistemology, a new culture, depending on your language, there's a flip of some kind. The Formation is more like Bildung. It's more about a transformative, civic, aesthetic and moral education playing out.

not everywhere. When people say at scale, again, there's this mistake that somehow it goes across the planet. You just need a critical mass of innovation, whereby the purpose of the economy is no longer just human enrichment, but rather to serve a learning civilization that is learning how to live with different ecological understanding and so on.

And finally, the fun is partly because it's alliteration, partly playing off the joke that the way to solve the planetary's problems, planet's problems, is to, have, to host a better party. Sometimes people joke, create a better party, invite people to that party, as a way of saying, bring the people who are in the consumerist trance, and bring the governments who are in the growth addicted policy mandate.

the only way of winning an election is to promise this thing, somehow show an alternative through different forms of practice, different community experiments, that shows something like an economy that works on different principles. but prior to getting there, the cultural sensibility that economy would have to have.

So the flip, the formation of the fund, changing our relationship to reality a kind of ed mass education at scale, and a new political economy, and the relationship between them. That's roughly what our work's about.

[01:22:10] Nate Hagens: So let me ask you one, one final question before I get to the the usual closing questions of my guests.

when you talked about why playing chess was a different way of thinking, one thing you left out that I think of when I hear about people playing chess is the ability to think many moves ahead. which I'm not so good at, which is why probably I'm not good at chess, but to use a chess analogy, is there any Queen's Gambit

move that you could visualize that could not solve the meta crisis, but make for a softer landing of what we expect?

So it's a huge question. I know it's

[01:22:54] Jonathan Rowson: okay. It's okay. most of your questions are huge. Don't worry. but the, sense I have is that this is a bit of an urban myth that chess players think really far ahead. Now, it's true that in a certain position, there are some positions where you do something we call calculation, where you have a vision of, you know, I go there, he goes there, I go there, he goes there, and you follow it through one line, and there's multiple variations.

It's almost like a tree with branches, and you see right to the end, and that's part of the prowess of being a player. However, that's quite rare. It's also true that, I think, the Russian grandmaster, Peter Fidler, said, anything more than four moves has a mistake in it. And by that he meant, even when you get very good, you begin to distrust the long term vision.

You begin to say, between here and there, I know I want to get there, and if I'm right, then that's where we're going. But frankly, I'm unlikely to get everything right. There will be surprises on the way. So really, Chesler's And that's a

[01:23:52] Nate Hagens: huge mapping, mapping onto our crisis, I think, is It is, because your real responsibility

[01:23:57] Jonathan Rowson: is the next move.

Like, that's the skill. And it's primarily a perceptual skill. It's reading the position clearly. So what a chess player has is is a good perception of what's going on and what the priorities are. They say in the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, and the expert, there are a few. Because we screen out a lot of irrelevant information.

And very quickly zoom in on, okay, there's one or two moves here, whereas for someone coming to the game new, there's multiple moves. In the same way, someone like Daniel or someone of that kind of caliber of mine can very quickly see what they're doing. what the essential things are. This has to happen.

And because of that, it's almost like a premise, and then you build out from there. So the way I see it as a chess player is, try and see the position as clearly as you can which, which means a kind of systemic reading of the position. And chess is in some ways the connection between system and psyche.

That's one way of understanding it. It's psyche meets system, and your job is to find the next move, and that's really it.

[01:25:04] Nate Hagens: Excellent. Thank you. so you've watched enough episodes, you know what my closing questions are. you've been researching and writing and speaking about the pickle, which is the, global metacrisis for some time.

What sort of a, personal advice do you have for the viewers of this program, the listeners on the podcast platforms who are aware of these things and would like some direction on what to do both in their own lives and to play a role in the larger pickle?

[01:25:38] Jonathan Rowson: Well, I struggle with giving advice because I think We come back to collective individuation.

When you give advice, you tend to go for the lowest common denominator, right? You tend to find something that works for everyone. And that's usually not what people need to hear. So I could, you know, I could say, spend time in good company every day, take a walk, eat well, sleep well, you know, that kind of thing.

But really what I want to say is I would put a word in for calling. And by that, I mean, I do believe, when you ask what I'm 100 percent sure of, it's not 100%, it's maybe 80%, but I do believe each of us has a sense of what we're meant to be doing. and it's often very clear, and it's sometimes quite quiet, but I would encourage everyone to listen in for that feeling of This is not what I'm meant to be doing, and this is what I'm meant to be doing.

And to move towards that sense of what you're meant to be doing. Now, meant to gets into a whole can of worms. What do you mean? Is there some grand plan? Whatever. I'm not sure. It's also just about your skills, your social context, your history, your identity. You can give it in secular form, but it can often feel quite mystical.

It can often feel, ah, this is my life. This is what I'm meant to be doing. And I'd encourage people just to trust that feeling, I think. and look for it. Because when you find it, life begins, you know, before then it's like you're kind of waiting for that. But when you actually find that feeling of, ah, this, then iuh, life takes on a new vitality.

[01:27:18] Nate Hagens: I like that. I like that answer. how would you change that advice for young people? And I have given talks to young people about finding their, passion or finding their purpose. And sometimes I get feedback like, They don't have a passion or a purpose. They don't know what their calling is yet. So how would you alter that advice for early twenties age humans?

[01:27:41] Jonathan Rowson: Very, it's very difficult today. I don't know how I would answer, but here's what I'm thinking of when you say that I borrowed this from Bonita Roy who you might know. She, said that the challenge today is that young people have to individuate themselves from the whole world. And by that I understand this, that the idea of individuation that I mentioned earlier is often relative to a assumption that there is a kind of world that you can separate yourself from.

So you, you decouple from the social surround and you sort of find your own form and then you re enter somehow. But when you don't really see a future when you can't imagine owning your own home, or you can't imagine wanting what the world has to offer, and you see a lot of debt, and you see a lot of illness, and you see ecocide, and you see war, and so on.

it's very hard in that context to say, go ahead and individuate, right? So in a sense, their challenge is to create a new world. Now, the only bit of hope I have to offer here comes a little bit from, you know, The framework of anthropology Margaret Mead's book called The Generation Gap. I think it's the seventies she wrote that.

But she speaks about prefigurative culture in there. and unlike post figurative culture and Configurative culture they are more about the past than the present. Prefigurative culture is very much about trying to create a new world in the absence of a world Now. This is where I don't have it on the inside.

I'm lucky to have a world. You know, I feel I was one of Fukuyama's children. I grew up in the sense that I grew up in the, at the purported end of history where liberal democracy made sense. And then there were various things happen, the Twin Towers, the Iraq War, climate started to bite, debt crisis, and so on.

And no longer clear, the world was quite so stable. But nonetheless, I feel I sort of know what normal looks like at some level, whereas I'm not sure younger people necessarily do. And also, they're digital natives, so their world changes in that way. I don't know if I'd have advice to them, but what I'd want to listen out for when I speak to them.

I'd want to listen, because their world is quite different from mine. Where they have flow states, where they feel flow, I'd want to understand that. individually. What makes them feel like they lose track of time and they're concentrated and alive? I'd also want to know about their collective flow states.

When do they feel together, particularly offline, that they're actually really alive? I'd ask them what it would look like to create a world out of those feelings, and I hope that conversation would go somewhere good. something like that.

[01:30:40] Nate Hagens: I think it would. you should maybe try that in London or thereabouts.

what do you care most about in the world, Jonathan?

[01:30:50] Jonathan Rowson: I mean, my heart response is my family my, my wife and children. but beyond that I think I care. There's something about getting real, that expression that means something to me. I care about, I recognize. delusion as a sort of feature, not a bug of the human experience.

I think we're all, to some extent, deluded. And I think spiritual development and growth and so on is related to becoming less deluded and wiser. So I care about that ongoing, lifelong journey to improve your relationship with reality to get clearer about what's really going on, who you really are, and so on.

and I also care about the moments where tears well up. I'm particularly, I feel they're almost messengers. So I would encourage everyone, notice when you well up.

It can often be a Disney movie, it can often be the funniest thing, like, not at all direct cause and consequence. But often there's a build up of emotion for whatever reason in your life, and suddenly you're watching something soppy on the TV, or you hear a song lyric, and you find this emotion welling up.

I find those moments almost like the interior trying to speak to you. So I would, I care about tears as messengers, let's say. I think it, I think we should, it's important to cry, and I think it's important to laugh, and I think when your tears come, that somehow you pay attention to them, and like they're friends, like, okay, what are you asking me to do?

[01:32:34] Nate Hagens: I like that. given how careful and equivocal and thoughtful you've been so far in this conversation, I expect you're going to punt on, this one. But if you had a magic wand, what is one thing you would do to change the course of the human predicament if there were no personal recourse to you?

[01:33:01] Jonathan Rowson: there's a few different things, but if there's one thing, it would probably be that everyone has a regular. meditation and or yoga practice. That if everyone had a moment of the day where they were grounding themselves and trying to find their better nature and remembering they have a body and remembering they're mortal and how precious it is to be alive, if we could have Each of us have a moment, half an hour to an hour of that every day.

I can't help but think that would bode well for humanity as a whole.

[01:33:41] Nate Hagens: I agree. you said there were a few things. Was there anything you wanted to add to that?

[01:33:45] Jonathan Rowson: Well, I think This is a bit more controversial and political, and it doesn'tI'm a little bit hypocritical here because I don't always apply it in my own life, but I do think there'll come a time when we look at the animal industry as a kind of abomination.

And I can imagine a world that was, if not vegan, then at least more vegetarian, perhaps with the occasional ritual meal that was some kind of important human cultural experience, but not aisles in the supermarket full of dead flesh. I feel there is something deeply deluded and disturbed about that.

Like I say, I'm fond of the occasional, you know, dish myself. It's not like I'm walking the talk there. But if you ask me what would make a difference at a planetary level, if we didn't have that violence baked into our daily life and we weren't in flight from it, we weren't in denial about our complicity in that violence every day, I think that would also augur well for our spirits, our relationships, and our relationship to the natural world.

[01:34:53] Nate Hagens: Thank you for that. so I think this was great. I again, I'll, I'll mention I knew that you were a thinker like this and, and I would love to have you back on the show because you have so much to say. Thank you for your work and thank you for your time today. To be continued, my friend. Pleasure.

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