

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Hello friends around the world. we live in a increasingly polarized and fractured society. There are lots of dualities and schisms. There's the left and the right and the global north and the global south and the climate change or climate change is not real or not human caused. There's the mechanistic and the animistic.

[00:00:25] There's the technology and human cleverness versus. ecology, and non renewable resources. there's also natalist and anti natalist and increasingly there are people that are anti human, or perceived to be anti human, and there are people that are unabashedly pro human. And what I'm gonna do is read a poem that I wrote 20 years ago this month, right between when I left Wall Street and I started my PhD at the University of Vermont, I had been traveling for several months with my golden retriever in a backpack full of ecology, Herman Daly, evolutionary biology books, and deeply reflecting about the state of the world.

[00:01:17] So I was 38. I think much the same way today, but Today I am more informed by the broader picture and by the constraints and momentum and metabolism of our system, so I want to use this poem as a launch off for what I think and feel today and why that's relevant to our global polarization and upcoming challenges.

[00:01:57] Okay, this poem was written in September 2004 on the Elk River Trail in Vancouver Island, British Columbia. It's called The Lament. up in the first growth firs, With ravens and jays I make nest. In winter, seldom touch the ground, When white canopy is my friend. Alone with my thoughts, the silence, Until a distant squeal disrupts.

[00:02:28] A human child is cold and wants to go home. I am the last Sasquatch, and I play hopscotch through the clear cut forests of your world. I cast the air north, then west, for that dank smell of Denning's past. My mate for life we met near Bend. Separated, long ago, in a glen, When loggers chanced upon us, Warm, hairy, musty memories, ah, I cannot find her, And fear we will breed no more.

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[00:03:02] I am the Tom Bombadil of this human generation, The infestation then larval bloom, On the backs of the carbon slaves, In a three second span of Earth's evolving. The salmon are fewer each year, Yet humans grow fat and have young, I am so lonely and do not understand. Where is my mate and my kind? I am the last Sasquatch, and I play hopscotch through the clear cuts of the human world.

[00:03:31] My daughter was hit by a tour bus near Saskatoon. I ate her body, as we all do, for the memories. She hadn't many, she was twenty. My sons I left long ago, Iwiwaki and Zeke, with the clubbed left foot. I search for them, away from the chainsaw, in the dwindling, deep, remaining earth shrines. I can't smell them, I don't hear their wail.

[00:04:01] I feel they are gone, unnoticed casualties, of earth's civil war. If humans ever come to kill this tree, to take the wood for their nests, I will flee this place. Deeper, darker, safer. But first fall on them in a fury. and smash their heads with cedar limbs. Then watch as their scarlet water nourishes the forest floor.

[00:04:33] Yeah, that was me 20 years ago. and by the way, for the record, my brother is kind of a Sasquatch nut. He has plaster cast and images where the Patterson film was filmed on his wall. I do not believe there was actually another wild ape in North America. There would have been, you know, the central limit theorem.

[00:04:53] We would have seen one and there would have been Native American legends and such. but I think it's one of those many things. I met Tosa Soltani from Brazil in New York last week. And she said she was talking about several of the uncontacted tribes in the Amazon. that we know are there because things they leave around, or we see on aerial images and we see evidence of them.

[00:05:20] And I think there's something about the things and creatures and areas in the world that have so far repelled the economic superorganism and are untrammelled and untouched by global civilization. I think that sparks something in us that kindles this animist valuing of the sacred. And I think a lot of people resonate with that and feel that.

[00:05:55] so I've changed my views. I still deeply care about wild nature, yet I've concluded that smashing their limbs and you know, a abrupt collapse of the human

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system, for many reasons I've discussed, could be the worst case for the natural world with wars and the 2020, you know, the modern version of Jared Diamond's chopping down the last tree and so I think there needs to be more of a holistic bend versus break, which is a large part of my work.

[00:06:36] so since 20 years ago, I still care about animals and nature the same amount, but I've looked at the answers are not so simple. The answers are beyond just a change in value and consciousness. The answers are beyond a lot of humans just agreeing that we've become takers and not leavers to use Daniel Quinn's framing.

[00:06:58] that is necessary. And a lot more people are feeling that and need to feel that which I'm going to talk about in a second, but it's not sufficient. so a couple of weeks ago I did a frankly on what if climate change was a hoax? And the point wasn't that climate change is a hoax. It's that even if it were there's lots of other ecological environmental impacts.

[00:07:22] So let me ask another hypothetical question. What if humans are bad eggs? I mean, we're one of nine hominids. All the other eight are gone. Now we're our only rival. and we have unarguably destroyed what was once a paradise in Eden ecologically speaking, on the stability of the Holocene from which we evolved.

[00:07:54] it's still amazing in the breadth of biodiversity and the number of species we have but it's, we're slowly leaving the stability of the last 10, 000 years. What if humans were a bad egg and the anti humans are correct? I think also that wouldn't totally matter because what brought us here does not mean what we have to do going forward.

[00:08:27] we can be different than we have been in the past. my friend Pella Teal is an eco psychologist and She told me a story about one of Joanna Macy's tools for discussion called the Council of All Beings. And you can pick an animal or something in the natural world and have a conversation about what gifts you bring.

[00:08:53] for example you speak on the behalf of a bee who pollinates flowers that end up having fruit. For humans and, other animals, or you're a tree that

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provides shadow and shade and home for birds and you produce oxygen and help with the hydrological cycle in the birds. They sing in the mornings and the evenings.

[00:09:18] and then if you're a human, you listen to this, and you feel sadder and sadder because what are you contributing? And Pella recounted in her latest class, a mouse came and said, Humans rejoice about all the natural world. They write songs, and they sing, and they write poems. poetry, and you celebrate the beauty.

[00:09:46] And I think this is right. This is what we have done, but it's also not sufficient. And I think humans writ large are going to have to change our role, not only to be stewards, but to be deeply embedded in the web of life. And let me explain how I can envision that happening. Our human systems run on productivity of course many economists will just say it's capital and labor, but the vast majority is how capital and labor combine with technology and fossil carbon and, drawing down the non ruleable inputs of, of the natural world.

[00:10:34] We have ancient productivity in the form of hydrocarbons. we have the current annual productivity, the net primary productivity of the, sun and the hydrological cycle, of which humans appropriate around 40%. There are things that humans can do that creates biological productivity. There is the regenerative farming, where we have animals that graze they feed the, the microorganisms with their poop, the microorganisms grow the grass, and this cycle that supports the regenerative soil and agriculture.

[00:11:15] This is not part of our system right now. We don't incentivize that. We don't have taxes or prices that reflect that. There's retaining water in systems, storing carbon and water in the soil and maintaining the connectivity of water, which would Of course, imply a changing in the dams around the world and restoring the wetlands, which is the most biodiverse places in the world and the most carbon intensive sinks.

[00:11:50] and we can restore forests. Forests around the world grow at 2. 6 percent per year. That is the productivity that they throw off. And we're of course, the scale of all the things I just mentioned is very important because the scale of our global 8 billion person, 1. 9 or 19 terawatt metabolism is way higher than the actual productivity of our current sun, water, and soil can provide.

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[00:12:20] But if humans, change our cultural incentives, change our prices. For instance, there could be all humans have to pay taxes to their government. If the government only allowed those taxes to be paid in some currency that could be gained only by doing some of those four things I just mentioned, growing forest retaining water, retaining the connectivity of water and regenerative farming.

[00:12:48] and protection of ecosystems so that we're growing habitat for species. These things are not prioritized in our world. so I don't believe, I do believe that we have at this 11th hour come to the precipice of all kinds of tipping points, thresholds, six out of 11 planetary boundaries are being exceeded.

[00:13:11] This is the wake up call. This is the time for a species level conversation. So, all the things that brought us here, the maximum power principle, the quest for status the hierarchy, the economic superorganism, the metabolism of, an energy hungry global, out of control economic system, all these things are true and are happening, but We also recognize why and how these things are happening, and there's an emergence, there's a knowledge, there's a, change in consciousness that's happening.

[00:13:51] And, just like you know, backcasting some ideology on the past, it doesn't matter in some ways. what happened 10, 000 years ago, what happened right now is, in theory, our choice. The same dynamic that some of you have chosen to be vegetarian because you know, cognitively, the impacts and your cognitive understanding has trumped your emotional choice to have a tasty BLT sandwich or whatever.

[00:14:26] That same suppression of the agenda of the gene. can happen in others and it can potentially happen at scale. The problem is, as followers of this show are aware, is that this is all happening at a time when our economy and our, we actually are heading for a world of more material scarcity and so Here's my work in the context of this.

[00:14:56] First of all, it's to describe the human predicament and the system science of what we face in a politically neutral nonjudgmental, just descriptive way, even without recommendations of where to go. Second is the bend, not break categories of interventions. and there's a lot of them and I will be talking about those a lot soon.

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[00:15:16] And third is a change in values, a change in consciousness, a recognition of our stakes at this time on this blue green planet. And then there's a recursiveness between the second and third categories that will hopefully we have more people in that third category who have a change in values and change in consciousness.

[00:15:37] get to work on the bend not break scenarios. However, with the wars and the financial overshoot and the nuclear risk and all the other uh, complexity risks that we face, We're going to have to do that in a crisis situation. So I don't know whether it's five years or five months or one month depending on who wins the election when it's okay for people like me to voice these things openly on the internet, because it's possible that this change in consciousness may have to happen underground and not while we're headed into the economic Great Simplification.

[00:16:25] So this is to say that I think it's really important to have a life ethic during these times and but I also think it's important to maintain a tether to the system science. We're going to have to use less, possibly substantially less. all the rest is kind of details and as we navigate the coming decades some of us.

[00:16:54] are going to have to champion the natural world. And it's possible that 50 years from now, we do have more of an ecological civilization that treats the productivity and the success of the economic system based on how much in service to life and the biosphere on this planet our actions have. I don't know exactly what that looks like, but that is the vision and the carrot that I'm working towards.

[00:17:30] I'm going to leave you with another poem, not mine by one of my favorite poems poets, Mary Oliver. I do not live happily or comfortably with the cleverness of our times. The talk is all about computers. The news is all about bombs and blood. This morning. In the fresh field I came upon a hidden nest.

[00:17:56] It held four warm speckled eggs. I touched them, then went softly away, having felt something more wonderful than all the electricity In New York City, I'll talk to you next week.