PLEASE NOTE: This transcript has been auto-generated and has not been fully proofed by ISEOF. If you have any questions please reach out to us at info@thegreatsimplification.com.

[00:00:00] **Stephen Jenkinson:** It's important to make sure that you don't turn grief and loss into one word because grieving doesn't require loss to appear. You mourn this stuff. Of course you do, but the skillfulness is not. How do you get on the other side of the mourning? The skillfulness is the mourning that you don't try to accelerate through it so that you're a more productive human on the other side.

[00:00:24] Once grief is understood, there is no other side. Grief is your companion now, not your adversary.

[00:00:37] Today I'm pleased to be joined by cultural activist and authors Stephen Jenkinson, to share his decades of wisdom on the subject of grief, loss and dying. Along with his wife, Natalie Roy Stephen co-founded the Orphan Wisdom School, where he writes and teaches about the skills of deep living, making human culture, and how to grieve and die well skills.

[00:01:02] He believes that our culture has forgotten. Today. Stephen holds a master's degree in theological studies from Harvard University and an additional master's degree in social work from the University of Toronto. Additionally, he served for years as the program director of a palliative care center in a major Toronto teaching hospital where he provided counseling at hundreds of deathbeds.

[00:01:27] He is the author of many books, including the Award-Winning Die Wise, a Manifesto for Sanity and Soul, as well as his upcoming book titled Matrimony Ritual, cultural and the Heart's Work. The message that Steven has to share with

us hits right at the heart of Modernity's, biggest Fears, which one might consider to be one of the drivers of what I refer to as the economic Superorganism.

[00:01:53] Fears of Ending, fears of death, loss of control, and fears of living with the absence of something that we once had in abundance. Stephen's work helps us remember how communities once lived with the fundamental parts of being human, rather than trying to ignore and overcome them. Learning to live this way may be one of the most important things we can do to prepare ourselves for The Great Simplification and for the rest of our lives.

[00:02:25] With that, please welcome perhaps an unorthodox guest for this show, Steven Jenkinson. Steven Jenkinson, welcome to the program. Thank you, Nate. I'm glad we finally made it. Yes. through, hills and valleys and technological problems. We did. So, I've asked you to join the show to discuss your decades of work on grief literacy, as well as your broader philosophy on wisdom and culture.

[00:02:57] you're trained in theology, social work, and traditional storytelling. And some of your most well-known work stems from your time as a palliative care counselor in Toronto, where you sat with thousands of people who were in the process of dying along with their families. Let's start there. what were the most important things you learned about death or the processes leading up to it?

[00:03:22] God, well, sad but true. You'd think there was a time made by the makers of time that were, that was designed or at least inadvertently had the consequence of bringing out the very best in humans as if we're waiting for such a cue. You'd think that dying would be one of those cues. You'd think it was more, it was acute enough, it had our attention by the scruff.

[00:03:54] You'd think that there was not much to debate. You'd think that we would rise. And anyway, I could keep going with the, allegation, and I'm telling you, no surprise, I'm sure by now that dying was not such a time any more than a

pandemic was such a time. The dying turned out to be same old, the dying that people died in the manner of their living.

[00:04:20] And honest to God, you really wished more for them. Than that. What does that mean? They died in the manner of their living. Yeah. Well, I mean, this would be relatively good news or fabulous news if they happened to have grown up, through their lives in a culture that was death literate as well as death friendly or amenable, maybe that's a better word.

[00:04:43] But, in Anglo North America, which is the only part of the world I know really much anything about, there's no such, cultural context. And so people, defer, not deferred. They, defaulted. There we are to a kind of, pandemonium of personal preference. That's what happened. and their personal repertoire for contending with dying came from the death phobic culture.

[00:05:19] So even at a death phobic culture has. Ways of contending with its phobia, but each one of them foments the phobia. See, that's, the nature of the solution that a death phobic culture generates. It generates, for example, the moral obligation to be hopeful. So what happens to you do sup suppose when you're dying anyway and you're obliged by the people around you and the healthcare, system to be generically hopeful for what, to what end and, what does it do to your capacity to inhabit fully the dying?

[00:06:01] And what it asks of you, and my answer to you is it compromises it beyond recognition to the point where you're either dying or you're hopeful, but you can't be both. We have a death phobic culture, on that. I would agree. is that the same around the world and how has that, been in history? I would assume that it wasn't always that way.

[00:06:24] Yeah, I would assume so too. Well, first of all, I mean, to be very culturally humble about the matter. I'm not really tremendously alerted to the conditions in the four corners and beyond.

[00:06:38] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Okay.

[00:06:39] **Stephen Jenkinson:** I mean, I've done a lot of work and interviewed a lot of traveling, but still that qualifies you for very little.

[00:06:45] So let's imagine there are places that are saner in every way than the place you and I are referring to now. and how are they sane? Do people, well, obviously people are dying every day in these places, so then their sanity doesn't come from longevity necessarily. Where does it come from? My answer would be they've been cheeked by j.

[00:07:09] With all of life's limitations through the course of their days and each of the life limitations did not come to them existentially or philosophically as an insult, it would've come to them as a condition, as a as if you will, a kind of divinity. An indwelling divinity limitations, frailties, endings, ruptures, breakages, all of those are visitations of what we're talking about.

[00:07:40] I now have so many questions, and I'm gonna go in a different direction than I thought. but I begin to see the parallels of a, culture and denial about death, and, grief with our current economic system and the stories that we tell, about unending progress and technology will save. and how you mentioned hope, it's kind of embedded in our culture.

[00:08:07] Yeah. But let me go way, way back and ask if you have an opinion, on this. a friend of mine is a neuroscientist, Ajit Ky, who wrote a book called, denial. And he has a hypothesis that our ancestors way, way back, who first came to

understand death and theory of mind, and they saw, oh, this person in our tribe just died.

[00:08:33] I am going to die eventually. And that, that created an evolutionary leap of denial and suppression of the things that you were just describing. And it caused an evolutionary leap in our species to deny scary things and actually caused our success because we became more risk taking and, other things.

[00:08:57] Do you, have any thoughts on that? Not something I've thought of until you've mentioned it now, but I'm, glad for the novelty. Well, I would say this, think of the caves. Think of the dodo caves. Altamira, LaSow and so on. Think of the, what we would call the decoration. Ask yourself whether or not people go that far into the bowels of the earth.

[00:09:24] You know, rank, atmosphere, questionable, light, questionable as to whether you're getting outta there alive. What were they doing? So if you're of the view that humanity is kind of one line with the, some variance, but basically it just continues, that's what humanity is, a recognizable through line through the whole thing, then you would probably come to the conclusion that every culture and every person in that culture has been as RUP related to its surroundings as we are, as homeless and as un belonging as we find ourselves to be.

[00:10:09] I'm deeply under persuaded that's true. I think the, primordial story of rupture separation from the divine, ho aimlessness homelessness in the world. I think these things are, they're fitfully appearing, but they're by no means universal. And I would suggest to you that the cave art that we see in these places is an art that speaks of, affinity and mutual recognition between the living world, the animal world, and so on.

[00:10:48] And humans. So, so I think there's lots of places, and there's some of them that are still around today that don't wake up every morning wondering if

the world can tolerate them another minute. But people who look like you and I. I mean, it's not an, alien thought, is it? No, and I just, I mean, here's another random question.

[00:11:13] I, live in the rural Midwest where people live on farms and death is part of the daily routine with animals and, other things. So our rural people like that more connected to reality and death and grief than people living in the museums and cocoons of big cities. Yeah. On the surface of it, the answer's probably yes.

[00:11:40] Here's the prob, the kind of caboose dilemma that goes along with that. There's nowhere for them to live out. That fundamental existential difference.

[00:11:53] That the dominant culture, the pervasive culture, the culture that gives you and I this tactical possibility to be talking now and all the rest is a place that couldn't care less about their affinity for the natural world and doesn't employ it.

[00:12:09] That's the more important thing, that there's no employment for the sensibility. So you keep it, you know, inside the family if you will, you keep it on the farm, but when you go into town or when you're negotiating with the bank for a remortgage or whatever it is, that shit's nowhere to be found. And it's reminds me very deeply of the kind of weekend workshop itis.

[00:12:36] The notion being that somehow when you're released Sunday night or Monday morning to the unchanged world, that all is new again, and that things are possible that weren't possible before. And by Wednesday, man, they have to pick you up by the pieces because it turns out that the world didn't change and iota as a consequence of your peak experience on Saturday night, that rings very true, to me.

[00:13:04] So, so getting back to your experience in palliative care, what were some common commonalities? You sat with literally hundreds or thousands of

people on their deathbeds. Were there some common themes that you, experienced over and over? Yeah. And these are generalities now. Yeah. So of course not doesn't apply to everyone, but, you could say that people were offended.

[00:13:34] By time making its way through their machinery.

[00:13:40] They were slighted by it as if, well, and the other half of it is they were surprised by it. So, of all things, imagine this, if I were to say to you right now, everybody knows they're gonna die, I don't think there'd be much pushback from you or anybody behind you.

[00:14:00] I mean, it's not a hard thing to sign up for unless you did the kind of work that I did. I'm telling you, I would've had no work to do. If everybody knew they were gonna die, it would've been like this. Oh, that's kind of the level of mayhem and sort of catastrophe. There would be the awe, God, is this it really, I was, I had plans for at least another couple weeks or, you know, whatever it was.

[00:14:28] But people genuinely, you could say this. Everybody knows that everybody else is gonna die. That's kind of immovable, rocket Gibraltar material there. Everybody knows everybody else is gonna die, and they have feelings for each other in this regard. But when it comes to identifying the necessity, the kind of moral obligation to occupy the facts of your dying beforehand as a citizen, as a grownup, there is not no such moral obligation.

[00:15:09] And so it's the wild west, isn't it? It's the wild west of counseling and psychotherapy. It's the wild west of hallucinogens and, and the departures of all kinds. And, the notion is that you owe nothing to the world leaving. Any more than you did when you got here? I've, in my own life, 'cause I'm curious, and open-minded.

[00:15:34] I've had three or four or maybe more times when I visualized myself on my own deathbed. Yeah. and kind of really sank into it. And it's a little scary and, serious. Yes, sir. but I've gotten insights every time I've done that, like, about my values and the things I prioritize. is that a an experience that you advocate or what can you say about that?

[00:16:03] Well, you have to credit the terror. I mean, the notion that it's an illusion that dying is an illusion. So the terror around dying is equally illusory is itself an illusion. The terror's real. Not only is it real, but it belongs. Okay, so if you simply understand dying, I shouldn't say simply, this is a challenging thing.

[00:16:28] If you understand dying to be a divinity, not something that comes from the divine, but a divinity itself, then the what opens up before you is the possibility of learning the ways of that divinity, the, vernacular you could say of that divinity, and you discover that it means you no harm, though it means you.

[00:17:01] You take the difference. No, there's such a thing, or there has been until fairly recently in the course of your, in my lifetime, this has changed. But there used to be such a thing called your time. Your time has come this notion, right? It's very negotiable now because of the technology and the medical advancements.

[00:17:21] Yeah. And so forth. And you know, we would think, apparently did think for the longest time that this quote, freedom from, the timeline produces some kind of uber human. I don't know. That's produces a kind of more enjoyable, you know, end stage or, and nothing of the kind is what happens. What happens is the more time you get, the more dying you are obliged to endure or learn about or practice.

[00:17:56] Or be defeated by. So you, in your writings, frequently use the, word or the, phrase the death trade. And you've written extensively on our modern

culture's struggle with the ending of things, including but not limited to life. In your opinion, what lies behind our modern fear of death and endings of, things fundamentally?

[00:18:24] Yeah. Well, I think there's a kind of, scrim sequence. You know, the, term from the theater,

[00:18:33] **Nate Hagens:** I

[00:18:33] **Stephen Jenkinson:** do not the kind of, oh, it's those old vaudeville screens that they would raise and lower according to whatever the act was doing or bring in from the sides. Okay. And there's a sequence of them in depth, right?

[00:18:44] So scrims, so in this case, you could say that the fear is further back for most sophisticated urban types. The fear is kind of in the wings. What's forward is a sense of, that the, arrangement is fundamentally inadequate because I can imagine a kind of working eternity for myself. I mean, I'm using the qualifiers there.

[00:19:17] I can imagine a kind of working eternity. An eternity that suits me until it doesn't, right? I can imagine it, but I can't occupy it, and I'm, I have grievance about that. That's modernity. I'm not a grieved by it. I'm grievance by it. I have complaint. I'm looking for central command to lodge my complaint.

[00:19:44] That's the leading edge. Most of what I saw in the death trade. A sense of insult of like crude injury and was that sense of insult and injury, and annoyance different between people, who had faith, in some afterlife, or religion. Or not? It's a great question. It's a great question, and I've been asked this quite a bit, so I really paid attention when I was there.

[00:20:14] And for what it's worth, it's kind of a straw poll, right? Because it's only a few thousand people. But anyway, this is what I saw, this people who added

some kind of faith matrix to draw upon didn't do any better as a group than anybody else did.

[00:20:34] Which is shocking. Yeah.

[00:20:35] **Nate Hagens:** Because

[00:20:36] **Stephen Jenkinson:** Jesus, what's it for?

[00:20:39] Speaking of Jesus? What, you know, what's it for then? What's it supposed to do? And I would suggest to you here's why. Most people's, modern people's faith vignettes that they operate with were generated in a circumstance deeply uninformed by the realities of dying. So they take out a kind of faith insurance policy to mitigate those realities you see, and when the realities come to call, the faith is not up to the task.

[00:21:16] My take would be it actually does help them today when, death is far off it, it's, but it's when actually death arrives, then it doesn't help at all. You could go further when death finally arrives, it staggers. It doesn't, come in and sit beside you quietly assume it's a position of sort of mutuality and ask you if you have any questions.

[00:21:43] That would be way too sane and way too conceivable. So it's a fraus, isn't it? It's a catastrophe. it's a moral failing of the architecture. I didn't anticipate asking you some of the questions I'm gonna ask you, but, obviously, I'm a podcast host, so these questions come up within me.

[00:22:09] how often do you think about your own death and anticipated and, roll it around in your mind, given all your work on these things?

[00:22:17] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Well,

[00:22:19] **Stephen Jenkinson:** I could tell you, and I didn't intend to talk about this either, but I can tell you things have changed mightily for me in the last 16 months.

[00:22:29] When I was doing the work, I was, able-bodied.

[00:22:34] Some people have said not of sound mind. I think I was fairly sound minded at the time and I think I brought the best of me forward, you know, for the sake of the work and the dying people and so on. But I can tell you this too, as a consequence of receiving a diagnosis that I did not see coming in any way, it's all some 16 months ago.

[00:22:59] Things do look different than they did when I was able-bodied and helping. Okay? And I'm, I absolutely grant that I, what I'm not saying is that I somehow completely aired back in the day, and now I'm completely literate on the subject. I'm not saying that what I'm saying to you is the prevailing weather.

[00:23:25] Has changed. I'm living with a degree of degeneration, which is slow, but observable and it's, is so fundamentally unnerving and rearranging of the, the repertoire. So does such mortality salience, increase your appreciation of the other things in life? Or how does it change your daily experience?

[00:23:54] God, you know, I wish it did. I wish I could tell you as I said, off the top, you know, because of what I saw, because of all the dying people that I have sort of crowded around me. All the dead, but they're all dead of course now because of that, and for no other reason, I have a kind of lucidity on the matter that never fails me.

[00:24:17] I wish I could tell you that's true. I don't know. For, the love of God. I will say this, I don't know what it takes for human, just garden variety humans like myself to get the idea fairly clear and not lose it. There's something about the

ordinary day that so compromises your capacity for insight, that it's, it staggers you.

[00:24:50] You know, I literally think to myself, dude, in the third person, what does it take? What are you waiting for? Whereby you don't fail the people around you with incremental, ordinary mulling in consequence. What? Why are you taken up? In things that are, have nothing to do with joy, for example. So, I mean, I'm completely, I'm, deeply disappointed in myself.

[00:25:29] I have to say how difficult it is to keep an eye on the prize. But isn't being disappointed in one's self is in some aspect of that also grounded in the reality that you're trying to espouse about how we live our lives and how we die. Oh, you know, it's one thing to talk about limitations, endings and frailties from the point of view of fairly competent physical frame.

[00:25:59] It's another thing entirely as you'd expect to occupy them for even minutes at a time to actually, how should I put this? to find a welcome. For that, which seems not to welcome you. So you're absolutely right. That's the throwdown, isn't it? The throwdown is you practice with others in hopes that you can bring some of this home only to discover that home is, no more magical a place than any of the other arenas of psychic war that you were involved in, you know, back in the day.

[00:26:43] How do you think our fear of death or fear of endings is reflected in the current and, growing crisis of mental health that we're seeing in your country? In my country and

[00:26:53] **Nate Hagens:** around the world?

[00:26:58] **Stephen Jenkinson:** Well, to be afraid to die belongs.

[00:27:04] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:27:04] **Stephen Jenkinson:** I would not call fear of death a carcinogen. I would call the refusal.

[00:27:14] To abide by the fear of death to be carcinogenic. I think that's a fundamental difference between those two things. You know, you're, I don't know about entitled, but you're kind of obliged to be fearful from time to time. I mean, I occasionally am seized by the throat at that notion. I, realize I'm probably not getting outta this decade, for example.

[00:27:42] And, you know, when you put numbers on it and increments and things like that, when you see the, sands of time choking at the hourglass, you know, midpoint, and they're rushing towards their dissent in you, you'd part of, you would like to slow it down. and then part of you realizes you have no choice in the matter.

[00:28:09] And then, part of you stops realizing things and starts scrambling. and these things all are well, how about this? So in my case, there's an element of neurodegeneration. You'd think that neurodegeneration by definition would compromise your take on things. But here's the irony. There's a part of me that's not degenerating watching the rest of me degenerate neurologically.

[00:28:46] it's, I mean, I'm not recommending it, but in its way, it's amazing. You can, I mean, you're told that your brain is dying. Okay. I don't feel pain or things of this kind, but occasionally there's, gravel in the machinery. It's something like this. Do you know those little flip books as a kid?

[00:29:12] You'd kind of flip through and the Yeah, and the staggered movement. That's exactly what it's like, the subtle intermediate movements or moments that allow me to move smoothly through space and time, not just mechanically, but psychologically and emotionally and so on. These, I'm, I lose every third frame, so I'm kind of, there's a kind of stutter step, psychically in there.

[00:29:41] And, at some point, I suppose what it'll mean, and I'll have to fess up to the fact that it's a full person compromise, but at these early stages, I'm able, and there's a kind of blessing in this to watch it from a distance and to have some kind of choice. In how I respond to it. I don't want to sound insensitive to your personal situation, but what you've just described is really a microcosm for how our culture is.

[00:30:18] And this podcast is, observing, the end of modernity that we still are privileged in, that we can have conversations like this and use facts and have insights about the future, but our current, arrangements may not last out the decade. And so how, do you see parallels with what you just described to our relationship with modernity as a culture?

[00:30:47] Well, I think we get an opportunity to practice. I think endings come sometimes in cascade and sometimes quite isolated. Many of them seem personal, but not all of them. What's the sign of a sane culture or one of the, one of the signposts? You know, my answer would be that a sane culture does not have, sorry, is not, bereft of crazy people.

[00:31:22] A sane culture has its allotment of crazy people. Of course it does, but they're not all crazy at the same time. One and two. In insane culture. The people who are not crazy now know that the crazy people are doing them a favor by embodying what craziness is and providing for the rest of the people temporarily, a kind of practice round.

[00:31:52] A kind of shadow boxing arrangement whereby when it's their turn, they don't come to it as an amateur. You see, they come to it as someone drawn into the mysteries already and, having the capacity to go, ah, it's my turn. That makes sense to me. And extrapolating that back to, the theme of this show, a large portion of my work, centers around things like overshoot and extinction and the loss of a future that our culture, has led us to expect, but is unrealistic.

[00:32:27] So you mentioned practice. How could cultivating the skill of grief or, some other recognition, as a kind of compass for navigating through these times, these tough realities? What, would be such a practice that we could start now as a test run? Yeah, that is a great form, well formulated question because it actually reimagines grief as something other than an affliction.

[00:32:54] Which has been my contention for years. Yeah. That grief, fundamentally is a skill, not an onset.

[00:33:04] **Nate Hagens:** That means grief is a skill. Skill. What, do you mean by That's

[00:33:06] **Stephen Jenkinson:** the skill? Yeah, it's the skill. It's a grief, fundamentally is an understanding. It's not a, an affliction, it's an understanding. So if someone has, suppressed grief and has no grief in their lives at all, and they come across you and your work and they're younger in their thirties or forties or whatever, right.

[00:33:35] what sort of advice do you have to, to them to integrate the skill of grief in their life, as a practice? Is, there a toolkit or is it a process, or what do you say? You know, if it was easy as a strategy, probably more people would do it. Okay. So it's counterintuitive. That's the first hint that left your own devices.

[00:34:02] You'd go the other way and have done so. So that's a recognizable observation to make. You know, you've already been there and grief doesn't have a real good PR firm working for it. Even still, even unto the present moment. it's, not that it's unavoidable. Grief is entirely avoidable. That's an important observation to, to let linger in the air for a moment.

[00:34:31] You can go through your whole life more or less grief free, but this, there will be a cost attached to it in terms of your capacity for three dimensional

living. Because grief is one of the dimensions. So this is what I mean, I'm just total novice on this, but this is what I always tell people when they have the loss of a dog, and I love dogs and have had dogs my whole life is when you lose a dog, it's like, well, for me it's like cutting off my leg or something.

[00:35:03] It's, it is family, right? And I cry, and I'm devastated. And I tell people, if you didn't feel that intense emotion of grief and sadness, then all the love and the joy that you had with your dog wouldn't have been real. So it's like, how much do you want to turn the amplitude up on both ends? And if you're not grieving at all, you're also not gonna experience all the joy and the highs.

[00:35:29] Is that fair? Yeah. It's, fair, but it's, I think it's important to make sure that you don't turn grief and loss into one word.

[00:35:40] These things often appear together as if it's a kind of moral law firm. Grief and loss, wherever you find one that's prompted by the other and so on. So why are grief and loss different?

[00:35:50] Yeah, because grieving doesn't require loss to be detonated or to appear Grieving. Grieving is an understanding, not, not a bereavement. Bereavement is very much about loss. It's about you've grown accustomed to the presence of the dog and it's kind of comforting element in your life and it's own intelligence, things of that.

[00:36:21] I mean, speaking to you as a farmer, now I know what you mean about this thing. We just had a coyote come through the fence for the first time in our farming lives. Took out a few young sheep, and I mean, you, mourn this stuff. Of course you do. But the skillfulness. Is not, how do you get on the other side of the mourning?

[00:36:44] The skillfulness is the mourning that you don't try to accelerate through it so that you're a more productive human on the other side. Once grief is understood, there is no other side. Grief is your companion now, not your adversary. If our culture was not so grief and death phobic, what other things might change in our culture as a result of that?

[00:37:16] I just quibb a little bit about the formulation and suggest to you that a more workable understanding would be death phobic. Yes, but grief illiterate. Okay. Thank you. Okay. And the reason I, just suggest that to you is that it is in the nature of grief as I've come to see it, to be learned. Right. That's why I use the word literacy to understand that there's, a repertoire for grieving that's, strongly advised and it constitutes a kind of atypical strength.

[00:37:56] Not a strength of resistance. It's a strength of porousness that life will not be kept at such a distance that you, your strangeness from. It continues. That grief is a kind of companionship with the slings and arrows. It's an unsought companionship. I'm doing pretty good now, Nate, that's not a bad formulation.

[00:38:27] No, it's not. But, and thank you for the clarification. But back to my question, if we were more glee, grief, literate, and less death phobic, what other things might that naturally, cause to arise in our, culture? Well, as you said the first time you asked me, thanks for the reminder, the capacity for joy, which is different from enjoyment, I think joy as a kind of moral stance, a kind of obligation of your citizenship.

[00:39:00] That's what I mean by joy. Your capacity for joy is underwritten by your capacity for grief.

[00:39:08] not only, it's just not coincidental. it's an under, it's a warranty. Grief is a kind of guarantor of your capacity to go. And this will do. There's a beautiful

moment in a poem by William Stafford. You know Stafford probably is a mid-westerner.

[00:39:29] Do you heard the name? Okay, I can't give you the later. If you'd like. I can give you the title of the poem. I can't remember now, but there's a moment. And he's writing this as an old man and he's kind of quietly advocating for old man's status. And somewhere in there he says, and this is pure grief now, he said, and to live in such a way and long enough that you're able to stand on the street corner, open your arms and wish the whole thing goodbye.

[00:40:02] I mean, it's just a remarkable moment because you know the grief illiteracy would say, don't wish a goodbye too soon. But Stafford is saying practice. You know, the art of losing is not hard to master. So that's a beautiful quote. So what you're implying is if we come to develop grief as a skill and become more grief literate, it turns up the volume and color and amplitude of joy and the other things in our life.

[00:40:36] now. Well, it, I think so. Yeah. The other thing it does is it compromises this zero to 60 vision.

[00:40:47] It's either this extreme or that extreme. I mean, where we, you know, extremities of human emotion tend to resemble the each other, the more extreme they become becomes harder and harder to distinguish intense love from intense hate, from intense infatuation, from intense, you know, possessiveness.

[00:41:06] But the, medium places, the gradients. That's where the subtleties of human living that we're granted and entrusted with, as well as burdened with can find their, deep articulation. That's kind of what grief, clears out the mid-range, if you will. So in contrast, to grief, you have been in your, writings and in your work, critical of hope as a response to uncertainty and endings.

[00:41:38] I think you even referred to it as a spiritual distraction. So what sort of danger does hope present during our current, cultural moment near the end of modernity or you and I agree, we're near the end of modernity. Well, I would first of all acknowledge that for groups of people historically and in the present time, hope would appear to be sometimes all there is.

[00:42:04] And so it's certainly not my job or my intent to quote, take that away from anyone.

[00:42:11] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:42:11] **Stephen Jenkinson:** Okay. So we're wondering about something here. We're not prescribing.

[00:42:14] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:42:15] **Stephen Jenkinson:** Okay. So. I've conducted a number of weddings, strangely enough, over the last decade or so, and this is where I was obliged to consider the difference between a vow and a promise.

[00:42:33] Because in those moments, nobody talks about promises, do they? Nope. You reserve this word vow for a very particular kind of moment, and you generally don't, generalize from that word across other kinds of articulation. No. So what's the difference between the two? Why do we reserve the word vow for that kind of a moment?

[00:42:56] What I've come up with is this. Promises are by definition, future reliant. That's what they're invoking it. It means, this is what I intend to do. This is what I mean to be, this is my, the best part of me comes forward and manifest. This is what you're likely to see, et cetera. A vow is what you're doing now.

[00:43:22] It's what's happening now. There is no future implied in a vow.

[00:43:28] Okay. You don't need a future to make a vow. You need at the present time, and this is why, when the afic at the front of the room is asking you those questions, they don't say, will you? They say, do you take so and so? It's a present moment thing.

[00:43:51] What's the relationship between this and what you're asking me about hope by definition is a future reliant proposition. Oh, that makes so much sense. Yeah. So what is the, vow equivalent with respect to hope? That's a great question. Well, I like being stopped here for a second. I guess you could say that, the capacity to be utterly employed by the necessities of the present moment is the alternative to the beam me Up Scotty proposition that promissory notes of the spiritual kind tend to be.

[00:44:38] Yeah. Well, so, so building on that, in my work I describe the crises of our world from a biophysical systems perspective. from your view, Steven, how do our material worlds today, which are very different than our ancestors interact with our internal

[00:44:58] **Nate Hagens:** spiritual worlds?

[00:45:04] **Stephen Jenkinson:** Do I know? This is where I'm glad I'm not Noam Chomsky and as you know, I really don't know everything.

[00:45:13] but I could take a stab.

[00:45:18] I don't know that things are so substantially irreversibly, quote, different than they've been at other times. I'm simply saying, I don't know that I can certainly appreciate the allegation and the gravitational pull that it has, the kind of singularity of misery that we've been, we find ourselves capable of.

[00:45:43] I think, you know, I come back to that cave's observation. I don't think it's a universal human constant to be a stranger in a strange land psychically,

spiritually, as well as ontologically and epistemologically and phenomenologically and so on. But the work of belonging is work. It's not delivery, it's not redemption, it's labor.

[00:46:11] You know, this is actually a beautiful word, etymologically in the language. The be prefix in English is an intensifying prefix. It's old Anglo-Saxon, usage. And it means, you know, deeper or it means more adamant whatever it is that follows it. And in the case of longing, which is such a gorgeous word, the beautiful thing about longing is that it resembles desire, not at all desires.

[00:46:43] Racket is to try to stop. This is, its kind of operating procedure, isn't it? It's trying to get satisfied. The beautiful thing about longing is you can long after something and be in the presence of that something at the same moment. The longing is not trying to be eclipsed into gratification. The longing is its own skillfulness and you can feel the grief in it.

[00:47:11] And how do we practice and develop such a skill of be longing? You don't hold the world to ransom.

[00:47:24] You understand yourself to be principally its servant, and that your allotment in years is a service proposition that any intrusion into your plans does not constitute violation or tragedy. Well, tragedy, yes, but betrayal, no. There is no promise that you get a relatively free ride until the machinery starts to break down, right?

[00:47:57] the fact, how about this? The presence of another human being in your life is a deep compromise for your imagination at, first contact. In other words, the obligation to get along with people feel you experience as a deep compromise of your better parts, of your more, you know, the, highly aspiring parts of you, kind of brought down by the grinding ordinariness of trying to make it work with a neighbor

[00:48:35] until you realize that the grinding this, of working it out with your neighbor is the employment of the best part of you, the employment of it now, and, to some degree the, in the informing of it and a kind of feedback loop, you know, that you don't seek, that you're your, the frustration of your capacity to.

[00:49:00] Imagine that unfettered goodness doesn't need to blame the neighbor. The strange, how about this, the strangeness of the stranger is there to call upon the best of you. This is why for the Greeks, Zeus was the, I'll use the term patron. Saint Zeus was the patron saint of strangers. They understood that the presence of strangers, to be it the most articulating of your cultural strengths and capacities.

[00:49:40] The beautiful challenge of the stranger is this, can you treat the stranger without reducing the stranger hood? Thereby, can you preserve the stranger, the strangeness? By employing the best part of you, so, so as not to turn them into a version of what you already understand. Boy, you're, quite the philosopher, in addition to your other, skills, I wanna be respectful of our, agreement on, on your time.

[00:50:17] But I do have quite a few questions still. but if you could, Steven offer one statement for future humans that listened to this program a decade or two from now,

[00:50:33] **Nate Hagens:** what, would it be?

[00:50:37] **Stephen Jenkinson:** I remember hearing this, so I may, I'm giving it to you second or third hand. I think it took place in Iceland. The local authorities placed a kind of plaque with three lines on it at the foot of a rapidly receding glacier. And as I've been told, the lines were as follows. We know what's happening. Second line, we know what must be done.

[00:51:10] Third line only you will know whether we did it or not. More or less.

[00:51:17] **Nate Hagens:** I like that. Yeah.

[00:51:21] **Stephen Jenkinson:** how would you advise those listening to the program now? how to learn to live lightly on the planet. Getting to know very well a small corner of the world entrusted to you. Doesn't mean owning it. It prob I have a farm.

[00:51:42] Farm, there's a corner of the farm. 'cause it's long. I'm able to do this that I set aside the moment I bought it. How did I set it aside? Did I fence it? No. Kind of the opposite. I didn't go there. I've never been there in 24 or five years. I love that. If you love a place the way things are now, if you really love a place, don't go there.

[00:52:10] There's more than one way to love.

[00:52:15] Wow, that, just is a microcosm for so many aspects of the deleterious aspects of our culture. yeah, because everything is about conquest and ownership and unexpected reward and discovery and, to keep things fallow. fallow. Yeah. Very good. Very good. Yep. That's it. So. A lot of people follow this podcast because they are aware of the pending, phase shift away from modernity to something else, which I call The Great Simplification.

[00:52:51] They're aware of climate and polarization and, geopolitics and economic, crises. do you have any personal advice, even though our culture is thick with advice, but you are an elder. so I'm asking you, do you have any advice for the listeners of this show? How, to manage in this period of global upheaval and anxiety and death phobia and grief illiteracy?

[00:53:21] It's a big assignment, eh, such a question. I think the answer has to be properly minor scaled. Minor keyed. The beautiful thing about an ordinary life, an unspectacular.

[00:53:41] Life is that in the increments, you can visit the best part of yourself in increments. It will never all appear all at once, I don't think. But there's moments that you can be surprised by a capacity that you haven't drawn upon lately that the world seems to require of you. And if you can just make the distinction between grief and grievance, I'm not saying all will be well, I'm saying that the legitimate sorrows won't be mistaken for misanthropy.

[00:54:29] I really resonate with that. there is an awful lot of blame, in our, yeah. In our current culture.

[00:54:35] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:54:36] **Stephen Jenkinson:** How would you change or add to that suggestion or that advice, for young humans in their teens or twenties who are learning about all the things? what advice do you have for young people?

[00:54:52] It's not gonna get better.

[00:54:55] **Nate Hagens:** Okay.

[00:54:57] **Stephen Jenkinson:** You've got to be able to engage in the work that you have in mind without the payday of feeling good about it preceding the work. We are of such a time and magnitude of dilemma now that we have to undertake generations of work, minus the spirit reward of being certain that we've got it right this time

[00:55:27] **Nate Hagens:** there.

[00:55:28] What do you care most about in the world, Steven?

[00:55:37] **Stephen Jenkinson:** Care. Well, I hope this doesn't sound lame, but I orchestrated my life to be able to hit the ground running to talk to you. I'm not exaggerating. I did. I have to Now, given the challenges that I'm contending with, I had to stop the momentum and occupy this chair.

[00:56:13] That's all there is. That's all. There's, and I'm, you know, I'm not even a small bee Buddhist. I don't have a Buddhist, you know, bone in me that I know about. But, that'll do, you know. The, incremental life, the one flower petal at a time life f unfolding and passing away. I mean, you we're here for a longer and longer time.

[00:56:45] It's not an indication that we're getting it right. At some point, we're gonna have to make not just peace with our limitations. We're gonna have to find a way to treasure and cherish them and understand them to be a visitation of God. And that would do if we could thank you for that. you probably don't know, and you were, you didn't wanna look at my draft questions when I sent them to you, which I appreciate, but I do ask this of all my guests.

[00:57:18] A closing question. If you had a magic wand and you could do one thing to change the future for humanity and the biosphere to be better and there was no risk to you, yourself, what is one thing you would do to change the future? Well, it'd be to change the present, wouldn't it? And the future will, you know, God bless it.

[00:57:40] We'll have to take care of itself. But the present is kind of available to us to do something about, I guess the prince, the big one that makes a lot of other ones possible is slow the fuck down. Both, in your sense of urgency. And your sense of betrayal and your sense of despair, all of those things can be

slowed down with no fear of mor mortal danger, ensuing, where you'd slow down the momentum would temporarily suspend.

[00:58:25] And, a suspension of momentum strikes me as a, friend to genius and to wisdom. It's an agent of wisdom. How's that? That landed right in the bullseye for me. And had you told me that two years ago, I think I would've maybe rolled my eyes, but I feel the wisdom of, slowing the momentum and, personally and, culturally.

[00:58:53] thank you for that. You're welcome, man. Even the momentum of grievance, you see, it's not just, I'm not talking about the machine and the wheel. I'm talking about the sense of the ramping up of grievance and, sense of betrayal of those who've come before us, and, you know, all of that stuff.

[00:59:12] It's not that it's not understandable, it's just, it's, I'm imploring us basically to consider the consequences of this kind of principled misanthropy, imagining that it's a stand in for conscience. It isn't, it's a replacement for conscience. Before I ask for your closing, thoughts, Steven, I understand you are working on a book that's coming out later this year.

[00:59:41] Would you briefly tell us about that? Well, it's, called Matrimony and the subtitle is Ritual Culture and the Heart at Work. Is it about marriage? Well, it's, I mean, it would have consequences for marriage. Yeah. But it's actually about that alchemical moment where allegedly two people become something other than what they've been as a consequence of submitting.

[01:00:13] Yeah, it's, you know, I did something about money and the soul's desires. Then I did something about dying. Then I did something about elderhood and aging. Then I did something about the pandemic. Each one of these enterprises, the writing enterprises, has been a kind of cultural, it's cultural work.

[01:00:31] It's not psychological work, really. And it's, I'm not hooing psychological work. I'm just saying, I'm not gonna do it. I'm gonna leave that to others and I'll see if I can undertake the same kind of instinct for, beatitude at the level of, you know, what a, nominally working culture still makes available to us.

[01:00:56] Certain moments set aside for alchemy and matrimony is one of those moments, and it's no surprise, it is a surprise. It's no coincidence that matrimony, the root word of matrimony is mother. Not wifeing mothering. Fascinating. No.

[01:01:17] Yeah. There's lots to say about it, but that's, it's coming out in August.

[01:01:20] Okay. Excellent. it also implies, or if I could, guess at what it implies that we change our vows with reality as individuals and as a culture, so that there are more vows and less promises. Yes. Very good. Very good. You're hip, to the vows now. I can hear that. Yeah, for sure. For sure.

[01:01:45] The, well, the beautiful thing about it is that Matrimony has a predecessor, a preamble, if you will. It's called Patrimony. And you know, maybe we could get ourselves to the point where somebody at the front of the room could end tone. Something that goes like this, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors, and strangers.

[01:02:09] We are gathered here, in the name of these two people before us to enter them and ourselves into the holy bonds of patrimony, the holy bonds of patrimony, the fathering of culture, and take it easy on the discrediting of anything that begins with P–A–T–R–I. Thank you. we went a little bit over.

[01:02:37] I so appreciate your time and wisdom and, some of your statements landed deeply with me in this conversation. Do you have any closing words, for our listeners about, this work, the world, the present, the future, our culture, et

cetera? I do, I think your listeners are lucky to have you. And I'm lucky to have met you.

[01:03:02] Thank you, Steven, so much for, your time and your work and I hope people will check out your new book and to be continued, sir. Thank you, Nate. Next time. If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please follow us on your favorite podcast platform. You can also visit The Great Simplification dot com for references and show notes from today's conversation.

[01:03:28] And to connect with fellow listeners of this podcast, check out our Discord channel. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett, Leslie Balu, Brady Hyen, and Lizzie Siri.