

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Reid Meloy:** Most human beings relate to each other on the basis of reciprocal affection, and if we have a deficit of that kind of exchange, we're likely to get depressed. That is not the social paradigm of the psychopath, the average psychopath. They're gonna be aware that the world is one in which you are always moving yourself into position of dominance over other people, and you want other people, or entities, or institutions to be in a submissive position.

[00:00:29] From an evolutionary perspective, what are we talking about here? We're talking about the a predatory approach and the treatment of other people as prey.

[00:00:44] **Nate Hagens:** Today I'm joined by two experts in the field of psychology, Dr. Nancy McWilliams and Dr. Reid Malloy to discuss dark personality traits and their relevance to our human predicament. Dr. Nancy McWilliams is a distinguished psychoanalyst, author and professor emerita at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University.

[00:01:07] Her published work addresses the clinical and cultural relevance of language in diagnosing complex personality patterns, including narcissistic and psychopathic structures. Dr. J Reid Malloy is a board certified forensic psychologist, clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine.

[00:01:30] A widely cited authority on psychopathy, personality disorders, and targeted violence. His recent work focuses on the application of forensic risk assessment tools to emerging threats such as terrorism and stok violence. In this episode, Nancy and Reid discuss how something called dark triad personality

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traits, which are together combined psychopathy, narcissism, and machiavellianism show up in our individual lives, our relationships, and in our society.

[00:02:04] One of the goals of this show is to understand how and why our civilization has become a runaway train of consumption and ecological overshoot, which I refer to as the economic Superorganism. At the heart of this is aggregate human behavior, how we act as individuals and how our collective actions reinforce systems that over time become destructive and not beneficial to society or the biosphere.

[00:02:29] This discussion on the dark triad helps illuminate how individualists with these traits are able to shape and be shaped by the larger social, economic, and institutional systems. We all depend on. Before we get into this episode, if you enjoy this podcast and want to connect with other listeners, I encourage you to join our new online community on hilo.com, which we have launched in place of our discord.

[00:03:00] Hilo, HYLO now serves as the digital commons for TGS listeners and was designed for pro-social and meaningful discussion where viewers from all over the world can connect online. You can find the link to join Hilo in the description of this episode, and we hope to see you there. With that, please welcome Dr.

[00:03:20] Nancy McWilliams and Dr. Reid Malloy. Nancy McWilliams, Reid Malloy. Welcome to the show. Thank you, Nate.

[00:03:31] **Nancy McWilliams:** Nice to be here.

[00:03:32] **Nate Hagens:** So, part of this show's goal is to explain how and why society today, seems like we're on a runaway train of consumption and extraction,

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and what I refer to as the economic Superorganism, which is in part driven by aggregate human behavior.

[00:03:52] in researching the two of your scholarship and work, I realized how central the concept of, dark personality traits or dark, triad shape our current civilizational behavior, both on a micro and a macro level. so I've invited you both here today to talk about a psychological theory of personality called the dark triad.

[00:04:17] But before we get to definitions of that and other key terms, why is this issue of dark personality types I important for society? Reid, maybe start with you.

[00:04:28] **Reid Meloy:** Well, Nate, the, I think the, prominent issue here is when individuals that share these traits, particularly the trait of psychopathy, which we'll be talking about in detail, which is one of the three of the, dark tri, is when they get in a position of power.

[00:04:48] And that is they move to a position where they do have, they do exercise control, dominance, over other individuals. And then from that position, of course they can be, extraordinarily destructive, whether it's, physical violence or something that is not kinetic, but that is much more structural and, systemic within the system in terms of decision making, that affects people, quite adversely.

[00:05:17] And, of course we'll be talking about that in depth, but that's, that, that movement to a position of power and dominance is where the problems

[00:05:25] **Nate Hagens:** begin to arise. So it's not just the fact that trade exists, it's in combination within a power in a social setting. Absolutely. I think so. Yeah.

[00:05:34] **Nancy McWilliams:** I don't tend to think in terms of traits.

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[00:05:38] I tend to think in terms of themes. the, dark triad, the traits of, machiavellianism and, narcissism. You can do assessments that find those traits in people. But I think, to really understand psychopathy, which I'm also, interested in for the conversation today, you have to have a sense for people's relationship to the issue of power.

[00:06:07] because psychopathic people are all about, increasing their power and never feeling powerless.

[00:06:15] **Nate Hagens:** So, I don't know if this is a, segue or of an, or an overlap of what, but my work, my PhD, was about power in the energy sense because power in an ecology sense is an ecosystem or an organism, accessing an energy gradient per unit time.

[00:06:36] And in physics and in engineering, power is energy or work done per unit time. So I think it's interesting to overlap that with, human, power. But, Nancy, before we get into dark triad, you are an expert in diagnostics. So how do we even as a diagnostician looking at, various demographic, probability distributions and personality tests, how do we even begin to figure out who people really are?

[00:07:07] **Nancy McWilliams:** Well, a lot of my work has been a critique of our current diagnostic systems, which tend to be based on observable traits and don't include the subjective experience of certain kinds of themes that might organize people. What really organizes personality is the story, the narrative. If you use Don.

[00:07:29] McAdams turns that organizes the way people see the world. And I've been, quite critical of the DSM description of antisocial personality disorder. Initially, it didn't even include lack of. Remorse because they didn't wanna have any internal subjective qualities in there. And they based the original criteria on

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the work of a sociologist Lee Robbins who had used prison inmates as the, the sort of standard for figuring out what was antisocial personality.

[00:08:09] But you can. You can be a criminal according to the legal system from all kinds of dynamics you're trying to feed your family. You're, part of a criminal subculture to which you're loyal. That right away makes you not psychopathic. You have, an addiction. You know, it's, you can't equate criminality with psychopathy.

[00:08:32] many people with psychopathic psychologies are what, here and bobak called, snakes in suits. They're people who are organized around power at any expense, who aren't capable of love, who can't treat others as subjects and only treat them as objects. all of the things that clicky talked about in the mask of sanity have always, influenced me.

[00:08:56] So it seems to me, if you really wanna understand personality, you can't do checklists of externally observable things. You have to develop a relationship in which you can feel. What are some of the. The narratives that, compel, a particular person through their life story

[00:09:17] **Nate Hagens:** so that you can't just take a 30 question test and determine something.

[00:09:22] You have to, there has to be interviews and observation and such.

[00:09:25] **Nancy McWilliams:** Well, there are some good tests. There's the hair psychopathy checklist that, that will, pull for a lot of this. But if you wanna get inside what the experience is like for the person, that's usually not enough.

[00:09:40] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So, I've talked about dark triad on, numerous episodes.

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[00:09:46] It is the combination of narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy, and there's something called, dark Tetrad, which adds a fourth, category, which is sadism. Nancy, maybe you could just, start off by explaining and defining narcissism and machiavellianism, and then Reid, I'll, ask you to do psychopathy and sadism.

[00:10:10] **Nancy McWilliams:** Well, from my perspective, narcissism would be when you're organizing preoccupation is in, the issue of whether you're idealized, whether you're connected with other people who are idealized.

[00:10:26] **Nate Hagens:** What does that mean? Idealized?

[00:10:29] **Nancy McWilliams:** you're hanging onto the idea that, you want to be seen as perfect. You have a kind of grandiose sense of, some people being inherently better than others.

[00:10:41] You tend to look for people to connect with who are gonna increase your status. It doesn't always go with psychopathy at all. There are plenty of people who are narcissistically preoccupied. That is, they're very preoccupied with constantly supporting their self-esteem, but they're not particularly into exerting their.

[00:11:01] Power.

[00:11:03] **Nate Hagens:** So it's, it goes without saying that any one of these questions could be a full one hour podcast. So, I'm just sure. Or more acknowledging that now. Yeah, exactly. or more so, it just continuing on narcissism, is it a binary thing? Yes or no? Or is it a sliding scale?

[00:11:21] **Nancy McWilliams:** It's a sliding scale.

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[00:11:23] Everybody's got narcissism. In fact, I would say everybody's got the potential for psychopathy too. We're all mammals. You know, I don't think that nature cuts. Neatly at the joints. so yeah, everybody has self-esteem concerns in normal self-esteem. We have to, you know, achieve certain ambitions. We want to be liked and appreciated and respected.

[00:11:48] it's when it gets excessive, like with any other personality quality that. You're willing to sort of throw everything else under the bus in order to keep your self-esteem, carefully protected.

[00:12:02] **Nate Hagens:** And what about, Machiavellianism? Can you briefly define that?

[00:12:06] **Nancy McWilliams:** Well, it's interesting. I was a political theorist before I was a psychologist and I read Machiavelli and, if you really wanna understand Machiavelli, you should see the movie or read the book.

[00:12:19] The Leopard. okay. By

[00:12:22] **Nate Hagens:** never heard of it.

[00:12:24] **Nancy McWilliams:** Lampadusa.

[00:12:25] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:12:25] **Nancy McWilliams:** Machiavelli wrote about how princes of small Italian, kingdoms could maintain their power. And if you are familiar with that novel or that movie, both of which are very good. You can see why it was very adaptive to learn how to use your power that way.

[00:12:48] Survival depended upon it. So Machiavellianism has, came from the work of Machiavelli and it describes an orientation. Psychologists got hold of the

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word because it implies, The consequences then the means, so the, ends always justify the means, in Machiavellianism. so anybody who is dealing with political issues has to be a bit manipulative and a bit Machiavellian, but it doesn't necessarily go with psychopathy.

[00:13:30] **Nate Hagens:** What would the opposite of Machiavellianism be?

[00:13:32] That you care about the, means and not the ends.

[00:13:37] **Nancy McWilliams:** It's what we would usually call personal integrity, where you speak what you believe is the truth, irrespective of whether it's gonna get you somewhere and you treat other people as subjects, not objects to be manipulated.

[00:13:51] **Nate Hagens:** Well, so far I have to have some mild narcissism, otherwise I wouldn't have a podcast.

[00:13:57] But I am the opposite of Machiavellianism because I'm trying to tell the truth on this show. and I don't know what the ends are. The ends are hopefully a better future than the default. Reid, could you, continue and define psychopathy? Sure,

[00:14:13] **Reid Meloy:** Nate. one of the things I'd add to what Nancy said, that is sort of a concise way of thinking about the narcissist, is they, live in a world of one.

[00:14:24] And, other people are essentially, they work so that other people are reflections of their, ideal self, the way they see themselves or want to see themselves. and you do have very benign narcissist individuals that will, live in this world of one, and, are very content. To do so and don't hurt other people.



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[00:14:52] But as we move into psychopathy and as we move into sadism, you see a level of, cruelty and aggression that may initially. Perhaps be nonviolent, but also can be extreme. for instance, we know from the research that if you take a very extreme human behavior, such as serial murder, we know that most serial murders are either moderately or severely psychopathic by personality, and most serial murders are also sadistic.

[00:15:30] My, wife and I have been watching, Fred and Rose West, the documentary on Netflix. And for the listeners, it's a, just a very good portrayal of two, sexually sadistic, psychopathic individuals that paired up in England, to murder young women back in the, early 1970s, but were not eventually prosecuted until approximately 25 or 30 years later.

[00:15:57] So you have that level of extreme. Behavior as an, example of psychopathy and sadism. But if we pull that back a bit, and just think about for a moment, focusing on psychopathy. these individuals. There's a asymmetric relationship between psychopathy and narcissism. and what that means is that most narcissistic individuals are not psychopathic.

[00:16:23] However, pathological narcissism is at the core of psychopathic personality. You don't have a psychopath unless you also have pathological narcissism, in the mix. So that's an asymmetric, relationship. But the psychopathic individual, tends to be an individual who will, Have, interpersonal relationships that are characterized by, by dominance of others.

[00:16:55] And one of, if I could pick out one thing that I wanna say that's, that I'd love your listeners to take away with them is that most human beings relate to each other. Their social paradigm is they relate to each other on the basis of, reciprocal affection that we all go through each day, hopefully with an exchange of reciprocal affection with other people that we care about, whether they're, whether it's our spouse, our partner, our children, people at work.

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[00:17:27] And if we have a deficit of that kind of reciprocal affectional exchange during the day, we're likely to get depressed. Over, you know, over the course of time. So we're built and we're wired both functionally and structurally in our brains. to have, that kind of reciprocal affectional exchange that is not the social paradigm of the psychopath.

[00:17:49] The social paradigm of the psychopath is dominance submission. It is not reciprocal affection. Do they know that? That's a great question. I think that it becomes so habituated, it becomes so much a part of their, day-to-day existence that they don't think about it much. but I think with the, you know, with at least the, average to bright normal psychopath, they're gonna be aware that the, world is one in which you are always moving yourself into position of dominance over other people.

[00:18:25] And you want other people, or entities, or institutions to be in a submissive position. So that's where they're most comfortable to be in a position of dominance over other entities. But then also very much a part of that, is this, notion of not having any kind of emotional makeup. To miss the reciprocal affectional relatedness.

[00:18:53] See, that's not something that, that they, that they think about or contemplate in their day-to-day existence

[00:19:00] **Nate Hagens:** because they never knew a, anything different. They, I mean, it's, this is how they see the world. So they, it feels normal maybe.

[00:19:07] **Reid Meloy:** Yeah, absolutely. It feels normal. And then if we think about from an evolutionary perspective, what are we talking about here?

[00:19:13] We're talking about a prey predator dynamic. We're talking about the, a predatory approach to other things, including people and the treatment of other

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people as, prey, and of course the predator's always trying to get into a position of dominance over his

[00:19:32] **Nate Hagens:** prey. So, okay. I have so many questions now.

[00:19:36] Building on that before we get, we before, so this is how it's gonna be. We're gonna go down some rabbit holes. I would imagine that all of these, narcissism, Nancy mentioned, Machiavellianism and psychopathy, their, they have some prevalence in our population, so they must have been, had some evolutionary adaptiveness to be present in some proportion of the 8 billion humans alive today.

[00:20:04] **Nancy McWilliams:** Yes,

[00:20:05] **Nate Hagens:** And it's just that. You know, if our species is 300,000 years old, at 20 years a generation that's 15,000 generations, the vast majority of those generations were in small bands of hunter gatherers. And at times we needed someone who was predatory and aggressive, otherwise, the tribe might have starved.

[00:20:25] But then what about a thousand years ago, or 2000 years ago, what, how did we deal with psychopaths, in, the gene pool, in, in our communities and villages and towns? Well, the Eskimos used to push 'em off the ice flow.

[00:20:40] **Reid Meloy:** Is that true? Yes. Yeah, that's true. in the Scandinavian countries, the whole notion of the berserker Emerged, you know, the berserk

[00:20:51] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, I've

[00:20:51] **Reid Meloy:** heard that. And these are individuals that, in that, in wartime, if you can control them, and that's of course the, yeah, that's a, that's the 64,000 question. If you can control the psychopathic members of your society in

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wartime and in a sense sort of direct them to, attack the enemy, that can work effectively for you.

[00:21:13] But in peace time, they can wreak havoc in society. Without. and of course the deficit here is any kind of the absence of any kind of bonding or attachment or loyalty to any one country, you know, or, group

[00:21:30] **Nate Hagens:** of people. So, I'm, gonna come back to you with more questions on psychopathy and I want to ask Nancy a follow up.

[00:21:37] But first, Reid, could you give me, just, 'cause we're gonna refer to this term a lot in the next hour, gimme a one sentence definition of, psychopathy.

[00:21:46] **Reid Meloy:** Yeah. Affective, interpersonal deficiencies and chronic socially

[00:21:53] **Nate Hagens:** deviant behavior. Okay. So, so Nancy, how are psychopaths born? or are they trained and influenced, by a certain cultural milieu, or, I expect the answer may be both.

[00:22:10] **Nancy McWilliams:** Yeah, I think so. I mean, I, think Reid knows, some of the literature on the. predispositions to psychopathy better than I do. But there's certainly some literature suggesting that some people are predisposed to be very power oriented and dominating. but also if you, there are many roots to this behavior, you can, identify with a psychopathic parent.

[00:22:37] You can be treated so abusively, negligently, capriciously that you never attach to another person because it's dangerous. What you, what can you attach to your own power? So there are many different routes, any of us, if we are in a situation where the authorities treat us with. Arbitrariness, capriciousness, abusiveness, we can find ourselves behaving, psychopath, for example, a lot of

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people experience the IRS as very negligent, abusive and capricious, and they have no compunctions about cheating on taxes, whereas they may not behave psychopath in other areas of their life.

[00:23:19] **Nate Hagens:** I thought the definition of psychopathy, or one of them was that there's, largely or a complete lack of empathy, like, of feeling for the other thing, like if I were to cheat on my taxes, I, think I would feel bad. well, that, that's maybe a bad example, but I have empathy for everything, which is like my downfall.

[00:23:42] Actually. I have an empathy handicap because I care about suffering of animals that aren't even born yet. but is that part of the psychopathy Reid is, a lack of empathy? Yeah, absolutely.

[00:23:55] **Reid Meloy:** That, One of the ways it's phrased is a callous disregard for the rights and feelings of others. but yeah, that lack of empathy is, very much there.

[00:24:05] And I think j just to ping off of something Nancy just said that typically the, the psychopathic child, the psychopathic child, is not going to form emotional attachments to other individuals. And over the years I've worked with, with moms and parents that had one psychopathic child among several children, and they will describe how, the, how painful and difficult it was 'cause they attempted to bond to their child.

[00:24:37] And there was no reciprocity. There was no, return. Bonding behavior on the part of the child. And we know that the absence of attachment and biologically the absence of attachment will typically lay the psychopathic foundation for a lack of a capacity for any kind of empathy. If you cannot bond to other individuals and you don't have the, both a functional and the structural

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ability to do that in your brain, that you're not gonna be able then to be able to have empathy for other individuals.

[00:25:15] **Nate Hagens:** So, quick clarifying question. In, the media and in the news, I often get confused by psychopathy and sociopathy, Reid. can you explain what the difference

[00:25:27] **Reid Meloy:** is? Sure. Yeah. Yeah. The term, sociopath actually came out of the, the mid 20th century, trying to make a distinction. That the sociopath was a product of his, environment and the psychopath was more endogenous coming from within, in, actually in 1968.

[00:25:51] And this is, this may be, it's, kind of a, it's kind of a humorous notion that, in 1968, the term sociopath and sociopathy was rejected by the American Psychiatric Association. So now that is what, almost 65 years ago when that, when that happened. But it has hung on in the culture, as sort of a pop psychology term, but people that work in this field, people that do research, that consult on these cases typically don't use that term, just because of its, in a sense, unofficial.

[00:26:30] Pop psychology, context that it is now used. So, you do see that, and it's, the word is actually very tenacious, you know, it seems to hang on and people wanna use it. But a comment about, environment versus biology with psychopathy is we, don't go binary when we think about these cases, that it's never either or.

[00:26:58] The question is always to what degree does environment shape the genetic predisposition for psychopathy? And to what degree does that genetic predisposition shape the environment and how the environment interacts with the individual. that being said, biology trumps environment when it comes to

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psychopathy, the more severe the psychopathic personality, the greater the genetic predisposition and the greater the heritability for psychopathy in

[00:27:34] **Nate Hagens:** that person.

[00:27:34] And, we must know that from twin studies and such. Yes, correct. Yeah. For the rest of the show, we will use the term psychopathy. thank you. Re and what about sadism? that is the fourth part of the dark, tetra. Could you briefly describe that? Yeah. Sadism is the experience

[00:27:53] **Reid Meloy:** of pleasure through the

[00:27:54] **Nate Hagens:** dominance and

[00:27:55] **Reid Meloy:** suffering of another.

[00:27:57] **Nate Hagens:** So the same way that people go through their day trying to get the social reciprocity feeling that you mentioned earlier. Some people actually get that from the suffering of others. It's like flipped. It actually works that way. Well,

[00:28:12] **Reid Meloy:** yeah. It's actually an ex, an experience of pleasure in the sadist.

[00:28:18] and, when he either witnesses and I use he, because this tends to be a gender dominant male behaviors that we're talking about here. All, of them or just sadism? Well, it always, you know, there's a, heavy gender influence in terms of all the dark, triad and dark tetrad, traits.

[00:28:39] You're gonna see them more manifest in males than you will in females. I thought it was just the males got caught more often. No, it, the, biology leans toward a maleness as being in a sense, almost a, Almost a necessary,

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structure. so, and the way that is played out is just at looking at differences in, epidemiological differences in the presence of psychopathy.

[00:29:08] You know, there's about a, it's about a five to one, ratio. So for every five psychopathic adult males, you will see one, psychopathic adult female. So there, it does lean heavily toward that. But in terms of the sadism, there's also, in a sense a subcategory of sadism, which we've referred to as sexual sadism.

[00:29:32] And the difference there is that with the sexual sadist, there's not just pleasure, but there's sexual arousal through the dominance and suffering of another. So we view sexual sadism as in a sense, a, subcategory of the sort of umbrella term

[00:29:49] **Nate Hagens:** sadism. So, that's dark triad and dark tetrad. would you, I mean, there are evolutionary, adaptation, a adaptive reasons that these people are in our population, but would you speculate that as a percentage of the population, let's just say the United States, for now, and not the world, is the percentage of dark triad people, at out of the total higher than it was historically in, in human cultures?

[00:30:22] Well, I wish

[00:30:23] **Reid Meloy:** I had an answer for that, Nate. I, you know, I just don't know. I don't know. I think there's anecdotal evidence that there's trending in the direction of more expression. For instance, The work that, gene Twang has done at San Diego State University on, pathological narcissism that generationally it seems to be much more frequent now than it was, 20, 30, 40 years ago.

[00:30:53] Well, probably because of social media. Yeah. Or that played a role. I think that's a heavy contributor. So we're seeing some trends in some research,



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but there really is not the kind of large scale formal study looking specifically at psychopathy over the generations.

[00:31:12] **Nate Hagens:** Can, narcissism created by social media, for instance, act as kind of a gateway drug to psychopathy?

[00:31:22] **Reid Meloy:** That's a very interesting question. That's a very interesting question. I'm not sure I'm gonna need to, I'm gonna need to ponder that a bit, but just off the top of my head, I think that you can get permissive structures within a society for the expression of individual psychopathy.

[00:31:46] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. So, what's it like to be around and interact with a person that, checks all the boxes, has dark triad or dark Chet triad traits, especially in a close relationship.

[00:32:01] Can, we tell that they have those traits, Nancy?

[00:32:04] **Nancy McWilliams:** Sometimes we can, and sometimes they're gonna charge. Well, you could, you're a professional addict. Well, not always, and I'll tell you what the exception is. This came out of a conversation I had with, a, general who was the commander of an Air Force base.

[00:32:17] I was brought to the Air Force base to teach about personality differences. And there was a day when they, people could have an hour with me. And mostly they were therapists who were treating like the general son or, you know, some, somebody's wife. But the commander of the base came and he said, my question to you is how do we prevent psychopaths from becoming generals?

[00:32:42] And I thought that was fascinating. So I asked him, how do you, what's your procedure for advancing people, in the military? And he said, it all comes from the evaluation of their senior officer. And I said, there's your problem 'cause

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a good psychopath can get over on anybody. I have found out years later that some student of mine that I thought was wonderful was widely known by classmates to be very psychopathic, but they knew how to play me and how to seem like a person who had my values and my interests.

[00:33:22] And I can't always discern who's a psychopath in ordinary situations, especially if I'm in an authority role. The people who always know are the people who are working under a psychopathic person. And often the people who are at the same level, they can be very charming.

[00:33:40] **Reid Meloy:** I would just add that, virtually all individuals can play nice for 45 minutes and that you cannot go through, one interview with an individual and be absolutely certain of what the personality is of this.

[00:34:02] and that's why we rely on other sources of data way beyond the self-report of the individual because we know the psychopathic individuals lie a lot. and so you can't trust what they're saying, although listening to what they're saying is very important because then you can get a measure of deception when you compare what they're saying with other data independent of what they

[00:34:24] **Nate Hagens:** can control.

[00:34:25] Here's a question, and I would hypothesize that the answer is 50 50, but I have no idea. Is there any evidence on political affiliation of, dark triad.

[00:34:36] **Nancy McWilliams:** Oh, I should know this 'cause my daughter's a political scientist, but I'm guessing the answer is 50 50 because other things that have been, investigated, like, like Drew Weston's work did not find the superiority for the blue or the red side.

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[00:34:54] **Reid Meloy:** Yeah. Yeah. Reid, any insight? No, just that it, again, it's about, you know, accumulation of power and cruelty toward other individuals. And that's how you can identify typically the, the politician who has either the dark triad or the dark tetrad, characteristics is, just their,

[00:35:15] **Nate Hagens:** behaviors.

[00:35:15] But we could say. We could infer that of the politicians in the United States or in the world, that there's probably a higher preponderance of dark triad in there than the general population, or not. I would say that there are

[00:35:30] **Reid Meloy:** certain professors including, politicians that tend to draw for some of these traits just given the nature of what the profession is that they're into, and then other professions that where the, traits would typically not be, not be adaptive, right.

[00:35:49] I think that is, I think that is truthful. Like for instance, I'll give you an example in the medical field, if you're, you, want your surgeon to have a certain level of healthy narcissism if they're gonna cut into your body narcissism or, psychopathy, no healthy narcissism. I want my surgeon to have a nice dose of healthy narcissism so that he is confident in what he's about to do.

[00:36:20] Okay? On the other hand, another medical profession in psychiatry is I would much rather the PS not have a huge amount of narcissism because they're, that's not going to lend itself toward the skillset of psychiatry. So there in two medical specialties, you have very different amounts of. These characteristics

[00:36:43] **Nate Hagens:** that we would wanna have.

[00:36:44] You mentioned earlier, the evolutionary, pulse for, predator prey. but in researching this interview, I learned there's a distinction between affective and

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predatory aggression, and can you briefly describe that and why is it relevant?

Yeah. that,

[00:37:04] **Reid Meloy:** that's a, very good area for, people to get clear about.

[00:37:09] We know that there's a long line of research now that there are basically two, what we call modes of aggression in mammals and also specifically in human beings. One is called affective aggression, and the others call predatory affective Aggression is typically, a highly emotional defensive response to a perceived threat, and we know that affective aggression and more specifically affective violence, is very, common in our species, that your body will physiologically react very rapidly.

[00:37:45] If there's any kind of, threat to your survival or, any kind of presented threat toward the survival of your offspring. and that's what we refer to as affective violence. It's defensive violence, highly emotional. A predation is very different. Predation is typically emotionless. It's planned, it's purposeful, it's an offensive form of violence, that is, absent any kind of high physiological arousal.

[00:38:18] But here's what's interesting is that both of these are, have an evolutionary basis, because they both serve survival. They have served our survival as a species for thousands of years, affective violence in terms of defense of who we are so that we can survive for the next day. When we see a tiger in the bush, we know how to react to that to keep ourselves safe.

[00:38:45] That's affective Violence. Pre predatory violence is also very important. Evolutionarily 'cause it's a basis for hunting. And what are we hunting for 30,000 years ago, we're hunting for food. So all of us would not be here, without the fact that our ancestors were very good at both affective and predatory violence.

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[00:39:11] And, the reason why that's important is to recognize that these capacities for violence, both affective and predatory violence, we all carry with us now, and they are deeply embedded in our brains. And so the capacities are there to be affective or predatorily violent. With psychopaths, we know that they do.

[00:39:34] More of both that they're at greater risk for affective violence and they are greater risk for predatory violence.

[00:39:43] **Nate Hagens:** So we talked earlier about how these dark triad traits, or dark tet tread, are a combination of nature and nurture, but in this case, nature predominates. But Nancy, on the nurture side, can you explain, what adverse childhood experiences are and how they influence the likelihood of a person having dark personality traits, as they grow up?

[00:40:07] **Nancy McWilliams:** Yeah. Adverse childhood experiences, is now the common lingo for bad things happen to you when you're a kid, basically. that can involve disaster. It can involve war and violence. It can involve abuse of various kinds. Exploitation, neglect is a, very bad experience because neglect means you're gonna die if you're a young child.

[00:40:34] Laws divorce. Witnessing violence is particularly hard on kids. it's worse than being the object of it in most instances. frequent moves. Food insecurity, discrimination, poverty. All of those things are adverse childhood experiences. Most of us go through some of those experiences and we come out okay.

[00:40:58] It, partly depends on what are the rewards for your particular reaction to those experiences. What are the incentives that keep you reacting in a particular way to them? and, that will vary greatly depending upon the environment and depending upon your personal temperament.

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[00:41:17] **Nate Hagens:** So are these traits mostly formed during childhood?

[00:41:21] or is it possible for someone to develop, dark triad traits as an adult, like type two diabetes?

[00:41:29] **Nancy McWilliams:** What we tend to think of as stone cold psychopathy certainly starts very early in childhood, but I think adults can be reinforced for behaving more and more psychopath, depending upon, you know, what the rewards are for doing that.

[00:41:47] and if you have a culture where greed is good and you're considered a Ws, if you think about anybody's feelings, you are getting slowly reinforced for more psychopathic like behavior. It may not be that you're internally a particularly psychopathic person, but you can certainly behave more along those lines.

[00:42:08] **Reid Meloy:** One of my favorite, Limited se, well, not limited, actually. It was a very long, cable series was breaking Bad. Yeah. And of course, breaking Bad is a great example. Yeah. Of what Nancy just said. Is that the narrative arc of that posed? The question is, Walter White is the psychopathy, was it always there?

[00:42:31] Yeah. And it's just emerging over the course of time, or was the psychopathy a product of the environmental stressors that he faced as an adult and therefore it unfolded over the course of time? And I always chuckle at the fact that he was referred to as, as Heisenberg was his sort of hidden name, the, you know, the uncertainty principle.

[00:42:56] And I was thinking, God, what a gr what a great screenwriter to give him the name Heisenberg. so I thought that was, so intriguing. But that, you know, that really captured in many ways

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[00:43:07] **Nate Hagens:** this nature nurture question. My question to you is, do psychopaths know their psychopaths or do they genuinely feel they are contributing to the greater good?

[00:43:18] or do they know, hey, I'm doing this all for myself. The power is, you know, necessary. I think it would depend

[00:43:27] **Reid Meloy:** on the individual. Okay. you know, completely, I think I have, I've evaluated many psychopathic individuals over the years, and, you do get individuals that actually take pride in their psychopathy And take pride in being a psychopathic personality. And others are frankly, in some ways troubled by it and are looking for ways to manage it more effectively. Right. Because their lives tend to be over time, strategic failures. their tactic tactically, psychopaths are very shrewd and very effective.

[00:44:06] But strategically they tend to be fails. And it may take years before that failure. You know, I'd point to an individual like, Bernie Madoff, who is likely a nonviolent, psychopath. It took years for his Ponzi scheme, to, to surface. yet eventually, of course it did. And then we had this just implosion of, all the people that suffered in relationship to him, including his family members and his two sons.

[00:44:41] yet, it was very successful for a number of

[00:44:43] **Nate Hagens:** years. This is great. Now we're gonna kind of get into the meat of it. but one more question, based on what you were just saying, Reid, or Nancy, feel free to answer this, I is, you know, people seek out psychotherapists if they have depression or OCD or something like that.

[00:45:02] Does the psychopath ever seek out therapy because they know something's wrong and wanna be fixed or healed? And can that happen? Can you

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heal a dark triad person and make them more centrist or even light triad, which I'd like to ask you about as well.

[00:45:19] **Nancy McWilliams:** I think that depends on the extent of the psychopathy.

[00:45:23] I think it's pretty clear that, the, people who are at the extreme end of the continuum are untreatable. They can't make a relationship, and if you can't make a relationship, psychotherapy is not gonna help you. But I have treated a, few people, who came to me feeling like something was wrong.

[00:45:45] They didn't know what, In two cases, it was, men in their mid fifties who had developed a substance use disorder and they eventually conquered it with the help of aa. And they, got sort of fascinated in AA with the idea that people were trying to tell the truth. And this was kind of a new idea to them.

[00:46:07] And they came to me thinking, I'm not living an authentic life. This seems to be a value for a lot of people. like one of these guys, had taken pride in his capacity to be unfaithful to his wife. And he said, you know, the other guys in aa, they take pride in fidelity. And I think that would be a more adaptive way to live my have.

[00:46:34] If you're going to be helpful to people with psychopathic, personalities, you cannot do what therapists normally do. You cannot connect through affection. You cannot connect through empathy because empathy is regarded by psychopathic people as the badge of the sap and the sucker. You know, any kind of acknowledgement of vulnerability is off the table.

[00:47:01] So the only way to connect is to take an attitude that sort of pulls. On your inner psychopath and say, look, what you're doing seems very impressive, but it's not gonna work out in the long term. And if you want some help in figuring



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out how to live a better life, I can probably help you. You gotta come, you gotta pay, you gotta try to talk.

[00:47:24] Honestly, when you find yourself getting over on me, which I suspect you will, it's gonna be better if you tell me about you when you did that, and we'll figure out what was going on. So you take this kind of tough guy style about it. and I don't have, I don't have any personal need to help you, but if you wanna make use of me, I think you can probably get something out of this.

[00:47:49] In other words, you sort of have to enter in, in. a version of the mental set that makes sense to them. You can't say, oh, you, must have had a really hard time in childhood that will get you immediately, devalued.

[00:48:03] **Nate Hagens:** So if you exhibit empathy to a psychopath or a dark triad, that's like putting a target on your head of sorts.

[00:48:11] **Nancy McWilliams:** Well, that's one way of saying it. I mean, they're gonna devalue that. you have to, you may be able to say, so what was that like? say more about that. But if you move in with, Ooh, that must have hurt. They're not gonna go there.

[00:48:26] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:48:26] **Nancy McWilliams:** And so therapists have to, if they want to work with people with this psychology, they have to, find a way to go against what's their much more natural way of connecting with people.

[00:48:39] I don't know if Reid would agree with this. I can see on the screen Nancy nodding. Yeah. Nancy just

[00:48:43] **Reid Meloy:** gave us in five minutes a diamond necklace on the treatment of the psychopath. that was brilliant. I mean, that, and she really

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touched upon all those important, elements in the treatment. the, one of the things that I wrote, now many years ago in a forward to a book was with a psychopath.

[00:49:05] There's less there than meets the eye. And, what that, what I meant by that was that the, a lot of times therapists will assume an internal psychological structure that is, that just frankly is not there. And they will work hard to try to uncover, the depression that's buried deep in this psychopathic individual or the anxiety disorder that's there.

[00:49:31] And, with the severely psychopathic individual, those are just absent. So what you're looking to help them do if they're open to it, is a kind of, practical steps so that they are in, less misery than they find themselves, but also in a way that is, does not hurt other people because again.

[00:49:59] Tactically, they're very shrewd, but strategically they will fail in the long run and will end up, often, you know, oftentimes in prison or being somehow in a very dramatic graphic way, excluded from

[00:50:14] **Nate Hagens:** society. I have so many questions. What happens if we put a psychopath or dark triad, individual in a group of.

[00:50:25] A hundred other individuals who are not psychopaths or two or three. has this experiment been done or, if we had a hundred of those groups, of a hundred individuals and we added a psychopath or two to each, is it predictable? What would happen over time? yeah, it's a,

[00:50:44] **Reid Meloy:** you know, it's evolutionarily, very clear and it's the psychopath, we'll attempt to, we'll separate the vulnerable from the herd, just as we see in the animal kingdom in, predation.

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[00:50:57] So he will be able to fare it out and identify the most vulnerable, weakest person in the herd for, explanation. Either, either, actually or metaphorically. We'll eat that, we'll eat that individual.

[00:51:10] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. So then he did that with three out of a hundred individuals that then he goes to the next weakest, or does it break the dynamic of the group?

[00:51:19] Can the group continue to function if there's psychopaths within it?

[00:51:23] **Reid Meloy:** Well, if the, if the group is smart and they can identify this individual and the danger that this individual opposes to the group alliance, then the group will get rid of that individual. And in our society, typically, for the severely psychopathic individual, it comes in two forms.

[00:51:42] one is that they are sent to prison for an extended period of time or two. they're executed, you know, they're eliminated from the gene pool. and that's how our society has dealt with severely psychopathic individuals. Or three, we elect them to high office. And that's also, very problematic.

[00:52:02] But the end result there is just, is further destruction because the power has been accumulated. Okay.

[00:52:09] **Nate Hagens:** I just had a interdisciplinary lightning bolt. so I'm sure you're both familiar with, E.O Wilson, David Sloan Wilson, multi-level selection. Humans historically, cooperation competition, selfish individuals within groups dominate.

[00:52:31] But the groups that have the fewest selfish individuals and the most cooperators have at evolutionary bottlenecks, you know, we're all hardwired with both. I think humans are generally, good people. pro-social and all the things

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we have, empathy, et cetera. But something happened around 10,000 years ago where we started to, farm and do agriculture. And we were no longer nomadic, hunter gatherers. And this created storable surplus and hierarchies and, other things. And there were lots of cultures and lots of tribes. But I wonder if the combination of economic or energetic surplus that is storable with a social primate who's curious, ambitious, and all the things that we are.

[00:53:30] But if you throw in some psychopaths and dark triad, this game, theoretic evolution ensues. And even if 90% of the tribes and the individuals are pro-social and light triad or whatever, those, psychopaths that will ripple through that and 10,000 later years later, here we are, is, there some validity to that?

[00:53:57] **Reid Meloy:** This is a very, gross estimate, but we can say in the United States, about 1% of adult males are psychopathic. okay. That's probably, you know, kind of the best figure we got. But I think about it as there's a stability to that, to that 1% and that they can ripple through a neighborhood, a community, a social or political hierarchy, and they will leave a trail of destruction behind them.

[00:54:30] And that destruction can come in a variety of forms, you know, whether it's, destruction of some v very necessary environmental support, or it's a destruction of other specific individuals that they have targeted within the neighborhood or the community. and that's what, you can count on.

[00:54:53] The, response to that means the constructive response to that kind of destruction is, early recognition. And then, collaboration among those who are not psychopathic, cooperating as a community, to manage the threat that individual poses to the integrity of the community.

[00:55:13] **Nate Hagens:** Except our, current, socioeconomic conditions are so wildly different than the past where we were in a tribe and there was strong reciprocity.

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[00:55:24] And if you didn't punish the cheaters, you had to punish the cheaters and punish those who didn't punish the cheaters, and it was somewhat stable. Now, if there's a psychopath and he starts to be discovered, he could just move to Seattle and start over again. and so there's, porous boundaries for psychopaths in our society.

[00:55:44] Yes. But I think that

[00:55:45] **Reid Meloy:** is one of the, positives, for instance, in the proliferation of social media that is very difficult to, com compartmentalize your manipulation. because word spreads, Instantaneously and globally. And so it's very hard to be effective in terms of be, an effective psychopath in terms of what you wanna get away with.

[00:56:14] It's much more difficult now than it used to be. That's a good point. Okay. So,

[00:56:19] **Nate Hagens:** Nancy, did you wanna add anything there? Well,

[00:56:21] **Nancy McWilliams:** I'm interested that you said that, 'cause that's one of the few good points I think of mass culture. I mean, you, talk about how we've, evolved to be in small tribal societies and a small tribal society.

[00:56:32] You can't get away with anything. but in a mass society, especially one that's full of anxiety about what's happening in the future, one of the ways that psychopaths can rise to the top is that people, are. Are looking for a strong leader. They're looking for power. they can be envious of, power and they can be taken in by it.

[00:56:55] And you get Stalin, you get Hitler there. This is an era where people feel a great deal of anxiety and it's, there's a, mass culture, effect here. Our

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society has put an awful lot of emphasis on individualism and not as much on a collective and cooperative, processes. and it used to be, now this is from my background in political theory, that we could have our individualistic just go for it.

[00:57:29] YY go be whoever you wanna be. We could have that as long as there was some counteracting voices in the society. So if you were part of a small town, if you were part of a religious community, if you were, and a part of a voluntary organization like Kiwanis or the Elks or the Lions or the Rotary, you were getting a different narrative than just go for it, get whatever you can.

[00:57:54] You were getting the narrative about sharing, being kind, taking care of other people, sacrificing for the common good and that narrative. Isn't coming at us with the same, frequency in this kind of culture.

[00:58:12] **Nate Hagens:** So are churches, and religious groups in that sense, kind of, natural antibodies to psychopathic behavior?

[00:58:20] **Nancy McWilliams:** Well, they can be, they can also be, laboratories for it where,

[00:58:26] **Nate Hagens:** oh, you know,

[00:58:27] **Nancy McWilliams:** I mean, cults for example, always,

[00:58:32] **Nate Hagens:** are cults usually led by, by psychopaths?

[00:58:34] **Nancy McWilliams:** Shouldn't say always, but almost always have a psychopath at the head.

[00:58:39] **Reid Meloy:** Oh, you know. Okay. Yeah. Typically they're led by, charismatic, what we call charismatic psychopaths.

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[00:58:44] **Nate Hagens:** Is that, almost always the case, psychopath and charisma. Do those go hand in hand or not necessarily?

[00:58:50] **Reid Meloy:** no, not necessarily at all. Okay. Typically, the charismatic and very bright psychopath will, assume a, assume a leadership role like, like within cults. And, that of course is extraordinarily dangerous, oftentimes ends with either the, the death of the leader and members of his group, or just the, deaths of members of his group.

[00:59:15] I think of Jim

[00:59:15] **Nate Hagens:** Jones. So, so the, academic literature studies Jim Jones and confirms he was a psychopath. there's

[00:59:24] **Reid Meloy:** a lot of data that he, okay, but he also had a, kind of a heavy dollop of paranoia. But I think from what I have seen, his behavior and his evolution was that of, or his devolution was that of a psychopath who became increasingly paranoid, which we also see happen with these individuals.

[00:59:42] If the environmental stressors are high enough, they will become paranoid.

[00:59:46] **Nate Hagens:** Can you two like leave your work at home and go watch a comedy and have a beer and, have a good time with your friends? I mean, this is pretty heavy stuff you've spent your life studying.

[00:59:57] **Reid Meloy:** yeah. I can speak to that a little bit.

[01:00:01] there, yeah, you have to be very careful 'cause in taking care of your mental and emotional health, in this kind of work. And there was a period, back in the nineties where I, it was, I was very much immersed in the darkness of this

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work. And to give you an illustration, I was doing a number of child sexual homicide cases as a forensic psychologist.

[01:00:30] And those are the. Some of the absolute darkest, most disturbing recesses of the, of human behavior. And I had to, pull out of that and away from that because of its debilitating effect on me, including at times having, posttraumatic symptoms after spending many, hours with individuals that has, that have engaged, e evaluating them, and typically in prisons, that have engaged in this kind of behavior and move toward career-wise, move toward more preventive work in terms of threat assessment and threat management, which was, had much more of a po you know, much, many more positive outcomes.

[01:01:19] So you have to be very careful with that and recognize the toxins that are there that can affect you quite deeply, and you have to titrate it. You'd have to be careful that you're only doing a certain number of hours of work and have a certain number of exposures to these kinds of individuals because of their

[01:01:42] **Nate Hagens:** effect on you.

[01:01:44] I could never have done that work. but that brings up a question. Do most people, most of the viewers and listeners of this program, almost by definition, know and interact with a, psychopath and a dark triad person in their lives? I mean, the nu it's kind of a numbers game, right?

[01:02:02] **Reid Meloy:** I, would say yes, probably.

[01:02:03] Folks that are, that are watching this podcast and listening to it, will have had experience with a psychopathic person or. Sadly are having an ongoing experience with a psychopathic individual in their lives. and it's, very real. it's debilitating. you have to work at extricating yourself from that, from that individual.



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[01:02:34] just going back to a comment that Nancy made, the most of these individuals also do not enter treatment unless there's some kind of coercive reason for them to be there. and with the severe psychopath to underscore something Nancy said, severely psychopathic individuals are not treatable by any kind of psychiatric or psychological, intervention.

[01:02:59] And we can't delude ourselves into thinking they can

[01:03:01] **Nate Hagens:** be fixed. So, I'm, gonna come back to this and, preventative measures and things we could do, in society. But let me, lemme do a macro, comment here. So, I know you guys know Zach Stein because he's, who introduced us, but his colleague Daniel Sch Achtenberg and I, have had several episodes and in his most recent episode we discussed how our modern systems, especially large corporations, can actually behave like institutional psychopaths.

[01:03:34] Yes. For example, the ways corporations were granted, legal personhood and structured to maximize profit above all else. It's created institutions in our culture that reward some of the traits you're talking about, like manipulation, ruthless self-interest, a lack of empathy, where's empathy in the, corporate structure.

[01:03:55] Kind of like a dark triad at a systemic level. so is that accurate?  
Observation?

[01:04:04] **Nancy McWilliams:** I think so. I, think there, there are not contravening trends, going on.

[01:04:11] **Nate Hagens:** Is our society itself narcissistic, Machiavellian and psychopathic our current culture?

[01:04:17] **Nancy McWilliams:** Well, we certainly have trended somewhat that way.

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[01:04:20] It's interesting. I teach all over the world and different people in different cultures. Therapists will tell me what they think their culture is like. Like the Russians told me they thought they were masochistic, and the Italians told, me they thought they were hysterical. And the Swedes told me they thought they were schizoid.

[01:04:37] And you know, I'll get people's descriptions of their general culture and I say, what, do you think would be the general tone of, the United States? And they look at their shoes and then they say, narcissistic. And I, think they're right because we are, in a way, we are, we're an adolescent culture.

[01:05:00] We, we broke off from the mother country. We're out there proving ourselves. we had the fantasy of unlimited resources in this new country, and we're still acting as if resources are unlimited. We didn't notice the genocide we had to commit in order to see ourselves as having unlimited resources. But there, there's a way in which the whole history of the United States has gone in a somewhat psychopathic direction.

[01:05:29] **Reid Meloy:** I think, the theme of psychopathy has, been. Woven through the history of the United States. and you see that in,

[01:05:41] **Nate Hagens:** oh, what a statement. Like, I agree with you. I just never thought about it. That's like a powerful sentence you just said.

[01:05:48] **Reid Meloy:** Yeah. That being said, however, the, I think the better Angels are also there too.

[01:05:54] Yes. But I st I think we're still, grappling with it because we are a, you know, we're a young nation still. and it's, and I think we're, in the throes right now of that

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[01:06:09] **Nate Hagens:** struggle. So how do the better angels, let's assume that the vast majority of a population are better angels and there are some psychopaths, and then the culture has its own kind of zeitgeist and, combinatorial personality.

[01:06:24] But what is the antidote? What is the defense either at the community level or at a national level or at a global level of the better Angels versus psychopathy, narcissism? Machiavellianism.

[01:06:38] **Reid Meloy:** that's a, I wish I had a, it's a huge question. Yeah. Yeah. I wish I had a simple answer to that, Nate. I will just comment on a portion of that is that I think, standing up of, local communities and local involvement, in, the health and welfare of your neighborhood, of your community are very important steps for stimulating that reciprocal affectional bonds that are so important for our survival as a species. I just returned from a, wilderness trip into Northern New Mexico and we had a moment at night where we witnessed a group of, 20 elk.

[01:07:27] And again, it was completely dark. And we were able to identify them by their, eyes, looking at us and shining flashlights from a distance at them. And what was remarkable was how their perception of us as a threat meant that these elk grouped more tightly together. And then faced outward as they cooperated as a herd to protect themselves against what could have been a threat to their, to their survival.

[01:08:01] And that sense of bonding and connection and community that, that I was able to witness in this, group of beautiful elk. In the dark, was really quite extraordinary because there's that primitive, evolutionary means by which they survived. any kind of threat from a, from a predator and it's of course for thousands of years, has been very effective.

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[01:08:33] And I think we need to, as fellow mammals, we need to, lean into our communities, as a means by which we can, in a sense defend against these various, predatory, threats, that, we do face, but seeing those predatory threats in a very, clear-eyed, calm manner so that we make the right decisions in terms of how to, Manage them.

[01:09:09] **Nate Hagens:** Nancy, what do you have to say to that?

[01:09:11] **Nancy McWilliams:** I agree with what Reid is saying, and I think that the implication of that is that, we have a leadership vacuum now on the side of, articulating. Values that people can organize around. When you, look at what Mandela did in South Africa, for example, or Martin Luther King did, he took the values of the community and he insisted on acting in accordance with those values.

[01:09:43] And, you know, there, there are a lot of better angels in the United States. Our parents taught us not to be, mean and not to lie. So somebody should be calling out when people are mean and when they lie. and we need somebody to rise to this occasion, in political leadership roles as well as the kind of communal dynamics that Reid is talking about.

[01:10:08] **Nate Hagens:** Can you briefly speak to what some researchers refer to as the light triad traits? Is, that a thing? And, you, can you describe what they are and how they differ from dark triad?

[01:10:19] **Reid Meloy:** Yeah, I can't, Nate, I'm not familiar with that term. Okay. And I, I don't know the

[01:10:23] **Nate Hagens:** research there. It, was a guy, Scott Berry Kaufman came up with it and, I, don't think it's as, researched as dark triad.

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[01:10:31] **Nancy McWilliams:** Yeah. I looked it up when you sent us Okay. That some of the topics that we might be talking about. And I found out that it was con, which I assume means Emmanuel Kant's idea of Yeah. of ethics, humanism and faith in humanity. Yeah. and the last one raises the whole issue of trust of, what Peter Fungi might call epistemic trust.

[01:10:57] psychopathic people are incapable of trust. and the rest of us, our trust can be undermined terribly. And part of leadership is, creating a situation where people feel more trust in the social fabric.

[01:11:13] **Reid Meloy:** As a, kind of a follow to that, Nate. I think every day now we are experiencing a masterclass in psychopathy and pathological narcissism.

[01:11:30] All you have to do is watch the news. Every day is a masterclass in psychopathy and pathological narcissism. And part of the problem there is that, the news media is drawn to that and drawn to that kind of coverage. They're not gonna be, they're not gonna be talking about the, how kind, Harold and Nancy were to their neighbors yesterday.

[01:12:00] That doesn't, draw the likes. It

[01:12:02] **Nate Hagens:** doesn't draw the attention. So the news media is dark triad itself in, many ways, machiavellianism. We gotta get the, end justifies the means. psychopathy, they don't have empathy. They just wanna sell things and narcissism watch my program, not the others.

[01:12:19] **Reid Meloy:** Yeah, I think there's, I think there's certainly complicity there. And, and it, does, drive attention. It drives coverage. it, is, I think, very difficult to swim against that because of how that's been monetized.

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[01:12:37] **Nancy McWilliams:** Yeah. And that's not individual people in the media any more than individual CEOs in the corporate sector are necessarily psychopathic.

[01:12:46] But if you're working in a system that rewards psychopathy again and again, yeah. The media are gonna behave psychopath too. So

[01:12:54] **Nate Hagens:** I wanna ask you an answerable question as opposed to one, too difficult to answer. So just pretend that 50 years from now, a hundred years from now, we've navigated, the, troubles that we're currently going through and glided to some more sustainable, human trajectory in the future.

[01:13:15] Given what you know of dark triad traits and how damaging that is to a culture, what are some guardrails that, that society might have, adopted to get to that point? What, might we learn from the psychological literature and the two of yours expertise and, others to, inform what might be more sustainable and pro-social?

[01:13:42] **Reid Meloy:** I think a very important guardrail in our society is the, is a concept of democracy and actually the document of our constitution. And I think that's a very, important guardrail that we need to, literally we need to protect at all costs if we're gonna survive. and, that from a political, social perspective, I think, is a thing that, that comes to mind for me.

[01:14:10] first.

[01:14:11] **Nate Hagens:** Okay, Nancy?

[01:14:13] **Nancy McWilliams:** similar. I, think, probably since the Reagan years, there's been this narrative in the culture that government is the problem. Well, governments are actually a lot more fragile than private groups, and we need to

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govern ourselves. And in a democracy, we are the government. And so I'd like to see a, change in the conversation about the importance of government and obeying the rules and, the legal system.

[01:14:44] And the legal system with all its flaws is, Masterpiece of Western civilization and, we disobey it at our peril.

[01:14:56] **Nate Hagens:** So what, to do, as individuals, and as a society, what, can we do? The people listening to this show, about this issue, whether they recognize, dark triad traits in our leaders and politicians or CEOs, or whether they have people in their own spheres and communities and lives, what can we as individuals in society do about this?

[01:15:23] **Nancy McWilliams:** I would say we have to try to keep telling the truth. people. Some psychoanalysts have said that human beings have a truth drive. And in other words, there's some part of human beings that recognizes what is true, that seeks what is true. And, if we, don't try to stand for what is true, we're in big trouble if we always say what works?

[01:15:51] **Nate Hagens:** You know, instead of what's true, two people, person A and person B, are explaining to you the truth, but one of them is a psychopath. is there an intuition that most people have that something is off with this person, even though the words and, body language, sound legit

[01:16:09] **Nancy McWilliams:** sometimes?

[01:16:11] Sometimes one of the things that I work with a lot is, therapists who've been, worked over by psychopathic patients and, they sometimes feel charmed, but eventually they, feel great distress, outrage over being used.

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[01:16:30] feeling had. and they often feel something that Reid talked about in one of his early books, A sense of Chill. They have to pay attention to that. If you pay attention to that, you may be able to identify these people. The thing that I pay a lot of attention to is whether a person can apologize, whether they can express gratitude, or whether they can express ordinary human dependent needs.

[01:16:56] If you're psychopathic, you can't do any of those things.

[01:17:00] **Nate Hagens:** Really, you can't apologize.

[01:17:02] **Nancy McWilliams:** No. Because that implies you did something wrong and you're trying to preserve the idea of yourself as flawlessly powerful.

[01:17:10] **Reid Meloy:** I would just add to that, kind of an acronym that I teach, to differentiate be some between somebody who is benignly narcissistic and somebody who's psychopathic.

[01:17:23] And it's, the acronym is a b, C, that the, psychopath does not experience anxiety, does not bond and does not have a conscience. Whereas a narcissistic individual can be quite anxious. They also typically conform attachments and typically they'll have a modicum of a conscience. Now, both may present initially as being, rather arrogant.

[01:17:54] and self-absorbed. But that a, b, C is a very important distinction between the psychopath who's arrogant and self-absorbed. And the narcissistic individual. And the narcissistic individual is Nancy, I think, will agree with is workable because of anxiety, capacity to bond and conscience where the psychopath with those, aspects of, psychology missing are not, you know, are not workable, in any kind of, treatment.

[01:18:26] Any kind of mental health treatment

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[01:18:28] **Nate Hagens:** that we have today? I don't think you, you both know a lot about my show. We're talking about, energy depletion and loss of biodiversity and climate change and inequality and, lots of things. Just generally, what are the two of yours biggest hopes for the future?

[01:18:46] **Reid Meloy:** That we live as one with our natural surroundings, both, on land and and, in the oceans. I, we, we tend to be, we being my family, tend to be very much into, the conservation and the, and the, Immense importance of living, living with nature. And that, of course, touches on all the areas, Nate, that I think that, that you're, involved with.

[01:19:23] I had mentioned being on this trip and, yeah, it was, it was one of Ted Turner's conservation estates called Ver Meho in Northern New Mexico. And it was just a marvelous experience because of the work that he's done, in terms of conservation on this, half million acre, property. And so that's deeply felt by me right now, and I hope.

[01:19:52] You know, four years to come.

[01:19:55] **Nancy McWilliams:** I agree with that. And I, would add on the psychological level, I would like to see us move toward appreciating limitation in psychotherapy. People come in to try to change, but they also come in because they have to accept what can't be changed. They have to tolerate limits.

[01:20:17] They have to grieve for what they can't do. And we don't have much of a language for that. But when you talk about the environment, we have to grieve this fantasy that it's, you know, inexhaustible, and come to terms with the fact that if we value this world, we have to acknowledge our limitations.

[01:20:41] **Nate Hagens:** I agree with you as a human being, but coming from a psychotherapist, that's a powerful, recommendation. I, wanna be, respectful of

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your time, both of you and Reid, you said you had a commitment. this is just scratch the surface 'cause this brought up more questions than I had, prepared.

[01:21:04] I, do actually feel. That our runaway, train that we're shoveling fuel into the engine and we've outsourced our wisdom to the financial markets and it's just out of control. I think psychopathy and dark triad may be part of the beating heart of what we refer to as Malo or the this Superorganism dynamic, and I need to think about it more.

[01:21:31] because the Superorganism doesn't define who we are as individual humans and our values and our hearts and our love for seeing elk, eyes in the dark and caring about the oceans and the future. It's just this, the, there. The psychopaths are riding the train, up in the engine of sorts. I don't think it's that clear, but I need to think about it, more and might have to invite you both back.

[01:22:02] do you have any, closing comments for people watching, listening to who understand and agree with what you've laid out here today? Well,

[01:22:10] **Reid Meloy:** the, I, my final comment is yeah, there, they're passengers on the train, but we don't let them be the conductor and we don't let them be the engineer up front.

[01:22:21] They're always gonna be passengers on the train.

[01:22:25] but don't, let 'em drive it.

[01:22:27] **Nate Hagens:** So we, need. More people to be aware of this dynamic and, yeah. Okay. Excellent, Nancy.

[01:22:36] **Nancy McWilliams:** I agree. I think people tend to project their goodness into other people and not see these dynamics.

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[01:22:42] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for all of your work, on these topics and it was great talking with you.

[01:22:49] Good. Thank you Nate. Likewise, very much. Thanks, Nancy. My pleasure. 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. And to connect with fellow listeners of this podcast, check out our Discord channel.

[01:23:14] This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stint. Leslie Bat Lutz, Brady Hayan, and Lizzie Sirianni.