

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. it is 25 years, after I've left Wall Street, 25 years after I had a bee in my bonnet to, Understand, care about and engage with the human predicament. and that comes with a blessing and a curse. the blessing is I often integrate, insights from between various disciplines.

[00:00:33] And the curse is that I can't help. Unsee things, so normal every day. Things like an advertisement or a billboard or a television show or a piece of art. give me unbidden, systems inferences. And today I'd like to talk about, one of these. Images, a piece of art that has, been prominent in my prefrontal cortex, the last couple weeks.

[00:01:06] It is this image from, photographer Emmanuel tardy about a sloth in Costa Rica. Climbing, a fence post by barbed wire. The picture, was a finalist in the Natural National Geographic, wildlife Photo of the year. It's titled, there's no place like Home. I probably have spent two full hours looking at this image, in the last couple weeks, e elapsed time over time, and I'd like to share some of the, wide boundary insights that have come to my mind and heart, while looking at this.

[00:01:52] This image

[00:02:03] firstly, It is a piece of art. Like I can't stop looking at it. And I think the definition of good art is something that you get mesmerized by. You get lost in, you look at and the colors and the composition and this sloth in motion, slow motion, climbing up this fence post and the encroaching. soybean plantation or whatever that is next to a forest.

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[00:02:37] It's just, it tells a story. so it's, it captures your attention as art. That's point number one. Point number two, in our class, reality 101, I taught my students about the concept of super normal stimuli, which is some stimulation or some signal in our modern world that gives us an intense replication, but on steroids, on leverage.

[00:03:10] then. Our ancestral cues. The example I used to use was, a Popsicle stick painted red that was larger than the baby birds put into a baby. Bird's nest. A mama bird would preferentially. Feed a Popsicle stick, a dead piece of human created wood worms and bugs because it was bigger and redder than her own babies.

[00:03:37] And so in this picture, this fence post, which was built, to connect barbed wire to keep animals or humans out of this, pasture was a super normal stimuli to this sloth. It was. Seeking refuge, and so it climbed something in its evolutionary past, climbing something. Didn't have, a top to it and wasn't connected with sharp cutting wires.

[00:04:08] This is a super normal stimuli placed in the environment of where a sloth has lived for millions of generations. and it's a novel thing, like after a rain. Here I go for a bike ride and you see thousands of night crawlers and worms on the asphalt. Asphalt didn't. End up being there and some of them end up being meals for, birds, but a lot of 'em just end up drying out when the sun comes.

[00:04:35] There are many examples of supernormal stimuli. In our current, world. The third insight I had was, oh my gosh, why aren't the people in Costa Rica protecting, these unbelievably cool sloth creatures? And by the way, other than cber, as a three toad sloth, would be on my bucket list to see what a fricking cool creature they are.

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[00:05:04] But it made me think, yeah, when I see Messiah warriors coming of age, they have to go out and kill a lion. And how horrible is that? The king of the beast is just being killed and the sloth of this beautiful creature in Costa Rica, and yet when the raccoons break into my barn and kill my ducks, it's like war.

[00:05:26] so it's a different, it's a, flip in perspective. It's not really war anymore because I, just capture them and have our trap and drive 'em 10 miles and let 'em go, but down by the Mississippi River. but you get my point is. I perceive lions and sloths as scarce and incredibly precious, but maybe people living where this land is in Costa Rica, don't have that feeling.

[00:05:57] and so we all view the world with respect to what's scarce and beautiful, in our own area versus other areas. it's an interesting perspective. another idea I had in viewing this, picture is the word sloth. it's an animal's name, but it's also one of the seven deadly sins. in Christian moral tradition, the seven deadly sins were pride avarice.

[00:06:33] Which I had to look up. It means greed. lust envy, gluttony wrath and sloth. made famous by the movie. Seven, with, Brad Pitt and, I forgot the other guy. Okay. Morgan Freeman. Morgan Freeman. Okay. So, these seven moral traditions were back in the day, a map for averting. Personal vices in the time when humans lived in small communities and they were useful and perhaps even central then, and they're probably still relevant now, but only partially and sloth was the last listed and might not even be a sin in today's, time equal money world.

[00:07:25] slowing down. Writ large in our world is probably a virtue, but more broadly, and I'm looking at this picture and thinking about sloth, our current world has almost a hundred times the population when the seven deadly sins were invented. Runs on Fossil bank account of sunlight Global, just in time supply chains.

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[00:07:48] And we have a social media algorithm driven attention economy. So the failure modes in today's world have scaled from 2000 years ago, and facing a global super Superorganism, and what will come in his wake. Perhaps there's a modern equivalent of these seven, deadly sins. And I thought about. What they might be, certainty.

[00:08:17] Overconfidence about how things will turn out. righteousness, which is condescending, single issue evangelism in our conversations. blame, which is outsourcing the cause and the response. To the human predicament, to, to various outgroups, borrow or borrowing, which is consuming today by stealing from tomorrow.

[00:08:45] We're doing this at a national level with debt, but, I, fear that a lot of people, will do that as well. Apathy would be one of the modern, seven deadly sins writing off any. Decent or even good futures. and th anthropocentrism, centering only humans, not only now, but as things get tougher in the future.

[00:09:12] And then the seventh one that I thought of, It would be thinning or unbecoming or dissolving or somewhere to represent the continued outsourcing of our creativity, cognition, and humanity to large language models, AI and algorithms. maybe I'll do a, frankly, on the seven modern, deadly sins. but this is like.

[00:09:41] I don't know how strange I am to look at this picture and have, all these, these inferences. Another insight I had from looking at this picture of a sloth. Is it hearkened? Back to the book that DJ White and I wrote The Bottlenecks of the 21st Century. we cataloged the environmental damage and impact and risk into two categories.

[00:10:09] One is the metabolism. Which is you just look at the size and the scale of the human endeavor, and the size of GDP, and you can infer, the carbon,

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ocean metabolic impacts on the world, without looking at any issues related. Just look at GDP, and that's, roughly a measure of our energy and our waste.

[00:10:35] And then the other category is what we do with all that energy. And so looking at this sloth, there are, what do people do locally in Costa Rica, wherever this picture was taken, to protect the forest, protect the ecosystems, have people care about the local fauna and, flora. and then there's the.

[00:10:54] Irrespective of what they do, there's a certain amount of global, coal, oil, gas, land use, change emissions, all the things that's growing in the atmosphere. And Costa Rican weather is going to change, irrespective of. What they do there because of demand for more meat in China and, other things that, that result in a global burning, of carbon.

[00:11:26] so th this is, it, bifurcated the, two types of environmental impact, but the biggest insight I had from seeing this image. Was, it made me think of environmentalism writ large, and there's so many people that have this formula of showing this cute picture of a sloth or a baby elephant whose mom got slaughtered or, albatross that had plastic in its belly and, dyed.

[00:12:02] And we show these images in our social media or LinkedIn or Facebook or Instagram or whatever as if to say, look, people, look at the horrible things that are happening to the other creatures on earth. We share this planet with, we need to fix this. And as if showing the suffering of another an animal is enough to do that.

[00:12:28] And I think what ends up happening is this. Somewhat is spiteful because people are miserable and they're sharing their misery with others. Part of it is guilt because we see what's happening that we've lost 70% of animal populations, in the world since I've been alive. We're losing insect biomass a couple percent a year.

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[00:12:51] there is guilt, there is shame, when we think about this, but when I think about it, if we pressed a button and every single of the 8.1 billion humans felt like I do, felt like many of you do that we need to widen the boundary of compassion and care. Beyond just the anthropocentric sphere to our kin, to our nieces, nephews, cousins in nature.

[00:13:22] if everyone. Felt that way and that changed their value system and they were willing to do something to, protect ecosystems and their denizens. We would still have to navigate the coming economic great Simplification. The only way out is through. So even if we all deeply, care about other species, we're going to have to navigate a substantial economic haircut in order to protect, and breathe life into healthy ecosystems, et cetera.

[00:14:05] so, so what do we do with that? Where, to go? once we understand that, I think there's three general steps. the first is, yes, let's press that button so that all humans widen their, capacity to care for other species, insects, birds, animals, oceans, watersheds, all the, things that.

[00:14:33] Support life on earth to care, to understand how they work and to care a change in consciousness. That's number one. Number two is all of the bend do not break interventions that we discuss on this podcast. Goldilocks technology. You know, pro-social prepping rocks in the river. Advanced policy we have to bend and not break in the coming decade or so, because the best path for.

[00:15:05] Slaws and elephants and dolphins is that the human system does not break, but that it bends. And lastly, one of the categories that I feel, is going to increasingly be necessary is in service of life underground, like building. Genesis plots, wherever you are around the earth, we're not going to be able to change the metabolism.

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[00:15:34] The metabolism of our global economic system is gonna change from its own momentum or lack of inputs. And then we're gonna have to respond. A Genesis plot, I just made that up, might be in your little area of the world in Topeka, Kansas, or, the outskirts of Sao Paulo or somewhere in China. You and your friends and colleagues take a stand, and breathe life into that plot so that there's more better soil and more biodiversity, and more insects and more capacity for life.

[00:16:12] In the same way that Gandalf, in, the end of the first movie said, you shall not pass the same sort of thing in your own ecosystem. You and people like you say that with respect to the global super organism, that's what it's gonna take someone on this land where this sloth lives, having that attitude.

[00:16:37] That the Superorganism will not cross this fence into the sloth or the orangutan or the leopard, or the, kookaburra's home. and we can do these things. And yes, the bell rug had its little tentacle flip around Gandalf's leg, and he disappeared for, quite a while in the movie. But he came back, as Gandalf the White.

[00:17:08] And as you all know, in the end, the shire was saved. So this is a true, frankly, I sat down, I didn't know what I was gonna say. but I've been looking at this picture, of this sloth. And wanted to share my thoughts, which are quite wide boundary. and thank you for listening. I will talk to you next week.