

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. It is the first snow here, in the Mississippi River Valley here on the border of Wisconsin and Minnesota. And that always puts me in a good mood, viewers of this channel. And, people I run into IRL, which someone younger than me recently told me means in real life, increasingly ask me, okay, I get the big picture.

[00:00:28] I kind of understand the economic Superorganism, the ecological risk, and the situation that we face. I see the challenges and their complexity at least loosely. So please tell me what do we do about this human predicament? and it's a very good question. It's actually the question, and I'm gonna have a lot more to say about this in 2026.

[00:00:53] today I'm going to outline six broad categories of interventions, each with three subcategories. and there's some context that needs to proceed this list

[00:01:19] with respect to the state of the world. Complexity science tells us that once a peak in something is reached, the resulting behavior of the phenomenon of the system. Becomes largely unpredictable, so describing what specifically is gonna happen in coming decades. Can't be known, but, and one of the reasons for this podcast and platform is we can squint and see the general trends ahead of us, poverty spreading and deepening relative to the recent past, the global temperature ratcheting higher decade by decade cooperation on the up slope, giving weight to friction and mental health, at least in the west, draining as our lived reality diverges from what we were promised.

[00:02:07] So first what we face is a predicament, not a problem. A problem has discrete solutions. X is broken, apply A, B, and C and X is restored. and after 20,

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25 years of researching and teaching this stuff, I've concluded that there is no fixing our current system with. Attacks or a policy shift or a charismatic leader.

[00:02:37] Because we're in a Wiley coyote space now, we're already in the legs moving rapidly in the air, off the cliff. and the only way out in my, analysis is through, which is gonna imply hard choices, less bad paths versus even worse paths. Triage, emergent interventions. Many of which are unknown or not yet available.

[00:03:06] so the goal is better than the default path grounded in realism, and that's gonna come from responses, plural, not neat packaged solutions. Next on the context is who is the we? The economic Superorganism and The Great Simplification story constitute a species wide challenge, well and more than our species challenge.

[00:03:35] So there are dozens, if not hundreds of different demographics and situations for which advice might apply differently. a college student in the United States who cares about the environment, but also needs a job. a factory worker in Spain, or an unemployed former teacher in New Zealand, that lost her job to ai.

[00:04:01] a young businessman in China running more and more into authoritarian control. a woman in Sri Lanka thinking of moving north to India because of the heat, and then a family in India thinking of moving even further north because of the heat. philanthropist who sold his business and wants to help the world.

[00:04:25] A newlywed couple excited about growing a family. a farmer in South America, the youngest of seven children just starting primary school in Nigeria, and all the way to an unborn human child, or a dolphin, or an orangutan or an ecosystem. So. You begin to see that everyone listening is naturally thinking of their own family, community, watershed country, but human.

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[00:05:00] And non-human circumstances and values are wildly different. So advice that helps one group, might be irrelevant or even counterproductive for another. If, a state politician is watching this podcast who has a climate solutions agenda, that's gonna be a very different what to do list than another politician with an economic growth agenda.

[00:05:25] Advising to direct money to regenerative agriculture might not be good advice to someone living paycheck to paycheck. And if there's one thing I've learned above all hosting this platform is the diversity of humanity. Is vast and complex in personal situation, in values, interests, skills, capabilities, but also equally of past experiences, trauma, identity, hot buttons, and all the things which makes discrete advice for the more than human predicament difficult.

[00:06:04] Before we begin, I also want to qualify what I mean by advice. Yes, obviously I would like to help people listening to this podcast in their own lives, but if I'm honest, that is a positive externality of this work, not the central goal. My North Star is helping humanity and the biosphere navigate the bottlenecks of the 21st century.

[00:06:27] So even when advice sounds personal, I'm aiming largely at social and ecological stability in the decades ahead. Yeah. That said, I do plan on having some dedicated podcasts and frankly, on personal advice next year, with a big asterisk because in many ways those will be advice to myself simultaneously.

[00:06:49] And finally, the list that follows is directional. It's not a menu of specific projects or policies or five easy steps to solve our situation. Because I'm pretty skeptical those don't exist. so these are categories and subcategories of directional advice generally in the direction of certain destinations, processes, and behaviors.

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[00:07:18] We aren't going to arrive at a better future than the default. We're gonna move toward it or away from it. So with that in mind, here's some directions of travel. I've come up with, six broad categories, governance, tech and investing, civic and cultural, ecological, behavioral. And developmental.

[00:07:45] So let's start with governance. Three subcategories. We need to move away from single point fragility, avoiding a regional or global war that goes nuclear outranks everything else in my assessment. because there is no to adaptation or mitigation plan possible for earth systems fallout from a large nuclear exchange.

[00:08:05] Full stop. relinquishing control to AI potentially also exacerbates that risk. And I think I mentioned in a recent, frankly, there was some, declassified research as shown. We've narrowly avoided nuclear war far more often than was previously known. And in most of those cases, it was a single human being's compassion, fear, or, just plain gut feeling.

[00:08:32] That prevented a catastrophe. and this same, not up to the task governance also applies to the risk of human extinction from ai, which in an upcoming episode with Nate Sore, tells us that all of the tier one AI heads admit that there is a realistic possibility of that. So directionally, we need different forms of governance and new institutional structures.

[00:08:58] Built in speed bumps that make it much harder for a small group, A glitch like this morning's cloud flare thing that hiccuped all the things or any rapid escalation or hidden mistake to destroy the biological fabric of this planet. And this means de-risking hair trigger nuclear postures for sure.

[00:09:23] Slowing and supervising certain AI capabilities, and somehow building in breaks, buffers, and human judgment whenever the downside is either civilizational or planetary. And to be frank, we are far away from this now. So let's

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start moving at least directionally away from single point extinction paths. second is towards commons thinking.

[00:09:56] We need more of what astronauts refer to as the overview effect in our international institutions. Some sort of lived sense that the atmosphere, oceans biodiversity. And even orbital space are shared assets instead of being considered free dumps or the next frontier to be strip mined and directionally, that means hard wiring commons thinking into trade rules, financial flows, and security arrangements.

[00:10:30] So that. One can win only so long, by wrecking the physical foundations for everyone else. and, then it's a disaster for everyone. Countries are still gonna compete, but maybe inside guardrails that protect the biosphere. And of course, those guardrails will only hold if people have basic safety nets.

[00:10:53] 'cause desperate people, if we've learned from a study of history, make desperate choices again. Right now we're, almost at a zero on this, but there is. A cultural awakening, at least, on the scout team talking about these things. So I'm talking about moving from basically none to some and over time, to much more, recognition of our, commons on this blue green earth.

[00:11:17] third category in governance is, I'll label it here towards subsidiarity, global governance that reduces destabilization is critically important, but we also need different governance at sub global scales. Subsidiarity. Is a Catholic school teaching, but I didn't learn it in Catholic school where decisions are made at the lowest competent level with higher levels only handling what the lower levels can't.

[00:11:47] In practice, this would look like nested governance with many like semi-autonomous centers. Towns, watersheds, regions that coordinate when needed with shared backstops, which kind of overlaps quite a bit with re

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regionalizing our world before that reality is foisted upon us. the logic is pretty basic.

[00:12:12] Many small connected nodes are more resilient than one big interconnected one. Again, as we're learning from the CloudFare, hiccup this morning. So directionally we'd move towards subnational governance models that bend and don't break. Okay. Second big category technology and investing. first is towards what I refer to as Goldilocks Tech.

[00:12:37] Much of our tech today just meets demand for convenience, comfort, and especially novelty under assumptions that the future is gonna look just like the past. Only shinier and we've heavily leaned into the model of bigger, faster, and more complex, which worked, in a long exponential growth phase, but is gonna become brittle and fragile as we move more into a constraints phase.

[00:13:05] So my rough Goldilocks tech checklist from last year's frankly still applies tools and technologies that are energy and ecology informed that lower aggregate demand. can be maintained and repaired locally and add resilience without needing a global. Just in time umbilical cord. so directionally we would be talking about things like heat pumps over crypto mining, bikes and buses over robo taxis, passive design and simple inputs instead of some new miracle material with some exotic origin if a technology.

[00:13:48] Fails when a shipping lane closes or a rare metal becomes scarce, it's probably too hot. and if it's just a dopamine sink or gathers dust because it's solving yesterday's problems, not the future ahead of The Great Simplification, it's too cold. so in my opinion, innovation increasingly needs to aim for just right, informed by our biophysical and ecological situation.

[00:14:19] And we probably first need to get much clearer. Publicly about what just right might mean because right now the market is building tech way too hot for

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the future that's likely to arrive. second is, directionally we need to head towards the right prices. Prices are the language of our modern system, and right now they're.

[00:14:44] Lying about physics and pollution under any intermediate or longer term lens. So directionally, we would need to move taxes. And incentives off of humans and onto throughput, carbon, but not only carbon, fossil water and mine materials and toxic waste so that markets actually become aware. Of depletion and pollution.

[00:15:12] 'cause right now they're not. And an even gradual movement in this direction would shift innovation away from even more rapid extraction of non-renewable stocks and toward, efficiency, substitution, and stewardship. okay. Lastly, under tech category, moving from narrow boundary to wide boundary capital, most investing today.

[00:15:38] It uses very narrow boundaries, short term, high time horizons, returns defined specifically in financial terms, which is understandable because that's exactly what our culture prices and incentives have rewarded. so directionally we need to widen how people define return on capital to include social, natural, and human capital.

[00:16:05] like soils that still hold water and the wellbeing of people and healthier communities and healed ecosystems and human experience of daily lives where their time isn't squeezed out to the last minute. And if the expected dollar return checks out and looks great on the spreadsheet, but the watershed, goes dry and the social contract dissolves.

[00:16:35] that's wide boundary destruction marketed as a narrow boundary profit. maybe a simple first filter would be, would my grandkids thank me for this investment, which is a decent proxy, for wide boundary capital. And I think

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philanthropy could be the early adopter of this cultural shift in how we think about returns.

[00:17:00] Okay. third broad category, civic or cultural? I think we need to change our status away from flexing, towards, well away from flexing, in the way that we are now. Our culture currently awards status for. Conspicuous consumption and flashy experiences, and we flex in our fashion, not me, but our culture, our jobs, our homes, and our online personas.

[00:17:37] And directionally, we need a status shift. We're maintaining, repairing, teaching, caring, and stewarding land and knowledge. Become more respected in high status roles, and the opposite is also relevant. If we're aware of our broader systemic predicament, then cutting down a local old growth forest for a strip mall or another airport expansion shouldn't be a decision that generates status, at least not locally.

[00:18:10] When young humans see admiration and meaning tied to things like. Okay. Kindness and community and appropriate inventions and the web of life, their aspirations, and in turn their career choices. And then ultimately our institutions and culture might shift accordingly. Okay. Second. we need to move away from polarization towards.

[00:18:42] Some share to understanding our inner eight brains really gravitate towards us versus them dynamics. And as most of you following this podcast, know, modern media and algorithms pour gasoline on that dynamic. So directionally we need more spaces and processes where people look at shared evidence, listen to each other, and then actually update their views, and conversations.

[00:19:09] Citizens assemblies, local forums. Cross partisan study circles, because communities that can reason together using science and shared facts are

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communities that are gonna act better and make better decisions under stress. and then that might scale in turn beyond communities. And so for, some encouraging real world examples of this, please watch.

[00:19:36] I think it was earlier this year. the episode with Audrey Tang, on different tech governance, options. Lastly in this category is we may need to move towards islands of coherence. we're gonna need places physical and social where the reality signal to noise ratio is high. And we're small groups of humans are actually responding to our unfolding situation in systemically informed ways.

[00:20:06] Even if our larger institutions remain in some kind of consensus trance, small committed groups can. See more clearly and act more wisely. And history shows they often do the pioneering work that the big systems, eventually observe and copy. Practically this means things like knowledge commons and local resilience groups and councils, maybe not official, maybe unofficial councils that integrate ecology, energy and the social fabric.

[00:20:43] In a conversation the other day, I came up with this idea, maybe one symbolic move might be adding seats, at local councils, a seat for the unborn and a seat for the keystone species in that area, that are designated humans whose explicit role is to add a lens for both long-term and non-human interests.

[00:21:07] Which leads me to the fourth broad category, which is ecological on, the directional advice for the more than human, predicament. And the first category is towards cooling. Whatever happens with global climate policy and with the peaking of fossil fuels, we are now headed for a hotter, more chaotic world for a long time.

[00:21:33] and this can feel abstract or less urgent, than economic or social issues, but earth's ecosystems are now drifting, outside the climate crucible our species grew up in. So directionally, we're gonna need a massive push on cooling.

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In coming decades, passive building designs, shade and trees and reflective surfaces and better ventilation and bringing water back to places we previously drained or dried out, and continued.

[00:22:05] Extremely careful exploration of any possible technological interventions. Cooling in our not too distant future, is not gonna be just about comfort, but about lowering wet bulb mortality, reducing the strain on grids and on people, and ecosystems and. Some of these things will never happen with our current prices and aspirations.

[00:22:39] We also need to directionally move towards, including other denizens of earth in our decisions. Our kin. We've mostly treated other species as background scenery for the human project as, non-player characters or props or, invisible. And directionally, we need to start treating them as kin and stakeholders because they and the ecosystems that support them are the living infrastructure that makes our lives, and importantly, our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren's lives possible.

[00:23:18] If we decide that life counts and more life counts more, we would design differently than we're doing now. Wildlife corridors instead of dead ends, fishing that specifically tries to leave breeders alive, cities and towns that host pollinators and birds. dedicated quiet zones in the oceans and a thousand other pathways.

[00:23:45] So directionally it's towards the web of life with humans if we're on top at all as apex custodians rather than apex predators. last in this subcategory though, there's probably 20 subcategories here, to be honest. is the importance towards having treason soil. being more important than they are now.

[00:24:13] the darker future scenarios are the ones where our actions rhyme with Easter Islanders, with respect to our trees and soil, even separate from, or

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especially separate from climate stabilizing functions, trees. Particularly old growth groves give us massive ecological benefits. Intact forests already store huge carbon stocks in trunks and roots and the soils under the trees, and they support biodiversity and food webs, and soil protection, and climate buffering and fire resilience, and as well articulated by my recent episode with Anastasia Ava.

[00:24:54] Intact forests create rain via the biotic pump soil. Also something we take for granted, because we replenish it artificially each year with fossil inputs. Healthy soils are living infrastructure. they're full of microbes and roots that cycle nutrients and lock up carbon and form this crumbly organic structure.

[00:25:19] And that structure soaks up rain and reduces floods and erosion as hold, holds water for, dry periods, and helps crops and ecosystems, become. More resilient and better for us. So directionally we need to move towards value in protecting existing forests and soils. And then also that would mean rebuilding and growing them.

[00:25:47] Okay. moving on to behavioral, and that would be human behavioral. so the first of the three subcategories is moving away from fear. I don't know what the other poll is there on, on the compass. But learning about the topics on this channel, AKA reality, understandably can create fear. But I forget what movie it was where they said Fear is the Mind Killer.

[00:26:18] It was probably an old Star Trek episode. No, it was Dune. It was Dune. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is natural, but Fear Alone is a terrible baseline to engage with. The multi-decade predicament ahead of us. 'cause fear hijacks our attention and it lets our amygdala grab the wheel from the prefrontal cortex.

[00:26:42] it shrinks our time horizon, you know, makes our discount rates steeper and it turbocharges us versus them, response dynamics. And we fixate,

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especially in this space on the daily. Dangers we see in the headlines. And in doing so, we repeatedly miss the slow systemic ones. As I just mentioned, soil and debt and ecosystems and the erosion of trust doom scrolling feeds our novelty bias.

[00:27:16] But the real perils are no longer novel. I'm not saying that we should look away from reality. Obviously being aware of the human predicament is important, or I wouldn't host this platform. I am saying that we're gonna have to some of us, many of us increasingly guard our nervous systems like a scarce resource.

[00:27:36] In a very noisy world, fear is appropriate for those saber-tooth tiger moments in our lives. But for everything else, we're gonna need composure or what I might call grounded agency, where we are clear and understand the risks, but we're still capable of calm, deliberate action. A calmer nervous system literally re-engages the prefrontal cortex leads to better trade-offs, better listening, better planning.

[00:28:09] and again, this is self-help of a sort because I'm learning about all this myself. Sleep, sunlight, movement and exercise. Breathing time, outside time with my ducks, time with my dogs, and honest in-person friendship. Beat doom scrolling and Starbucks feel outrage, as prep for the coming decades.

[00:28:36] So directionally, we're after less reactivity and more capacity, more people who can stay regulated under pressure. So there's room for wisdom, over reflexes and more we, instead of us versus them. I guess another way to say this is directionally away from chronically being in a sympathetic nervous system activation, and more time in parasympathetic.

[00:29:05] Next point. Towards sanity and mental health. I forget the quote. A sane person to an insane society must appear insane. In order to have islands of

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coherence, we'll first need something like coalitions of sanity, groups of people who are fully healthy mentally. A culture of distraction, overstimulation, and constant crisis headlines is eroding our mental health.

[00:29:36] at the exact time, we're gonna need clear minds more than ever. So directionally, we're gonna want more humans with basic psychological hygiene, self-imposed boundaries on addictive tech. Here I'm looking in the mirror, Nate. real life friendships, grief, work, and support for when we're struggling.

[00:30:03] sane, emotionally regulated humans are much less likely to turn inward or to turn on each other, as things get bumpy. And can you imagine the change with five to 10% of people in your community, aware, awake, sane, and grounded discussing and preparing for these collective challenges? Which leads me to the third sub point, towards autonomy and away from.

[00:30:32] the economic Superorganism, most of us, knowingly or not, are plugged in to what I refer to as the economic Superorganism for almost everything, food, energy, skills, entertainment, even attachment and meaning. I wonder how many people this morning when all the AI chatbots were down because of the CloudFare disruption had, were jonesing for some sort of connection and had a dopamine loss.

[00:30:57] I digress. That's its own, frankly. but earlier this year I, I had a video, called something like Towards Individual, individual Sovereignty, which outlined suggestions for, as an individual obtaining kind of mental sovereignty in a culture that has mostly stripped us of it. And I think some individual autonomy is increasingly going to be important for agents of change going forward.

[00:31:24] But also just to lead a healthy, lower standard deviation existence, in the rollercoaster ride ahead. So directionally, we want people. And ultimately communities to have some autonomy, psychological independence from social

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media and gadgets, basic food knowledge and some repair skills and mutual aid networks.

[00:31:49] So we self source our daily neurotransmitters instead of outsourcing everything to, the Star Trek Borg. And then these humans can become what I am referring to as rocks in the river, which are points of stability and clarity and even leadership as the rushing water and the current picks up speed and in aggregate enough rocks in the river can become those islands of coherence I keep mentioning.

[00:32:22] Okay. Last category, is developmental. And the first sub is away from the focus on, me. And we're each of us thinking about our own lives and how they fit into this evolving game board, which is the more than human predicament. But at the same time, we're each individual members of homo sapien sapiens, and this really is a species level transmission, transition moment.

[00:32:52] The agenda of the gene, which DJ and I wrote about in our books, is a neurotransmitter and hormone led impulse to seek status, grab and hoard resources. That all got us to this moment. But we are not hostage to those impulses. As individual humans, we can access a wider frame, noticing our own impulses.

[00:33:16] Having little Nate on my shoulder notice in a metacognition way what I'm doing, we can lengthen our time horizons and choose care, and volition over reflex. And there is a higher level of consciousness available to us as individual humans that's emerging at the same time as all this chaos and risk, our culture is waking up to maturity at a species level.

[00:33:44] In my opinion, looks a lot like widening the circle of how we define us. And directionally we want more people whose identity includes their family.

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Community, watershed and even other species so that acting for the whole doesn't feel like a sacrifice, but actually feels natural and more like self care.

[00:34:08] Everyone watching this show, we humans are all related and we're also related to every other living creature on earth. In what we know to be a dark and lonely universe. So there's a developmental shift from me to us that is directionally possible, even as the me is also likely to be strongly activated in, coming decades.

[00:34:32] so the work is to grow an identity big enough to think for more than ourselves and then to actually act from that place. Second some point, is moving away from consumption and convenience towards something like legacy or meaning and seeking comfort and convenience in the next day or two, is a natural state for humans across hundreds of cultures past and present.

[00:35:01] But our current culture hyper promotes optimizing and defining SEC success. With more salary profits, bigger or more houses growing, our investments, et cetera. So directionally, what would happen if increasing number of humans re-anchor their priorities in a social way from consumption and convenience towards legacy and meaning, what am I contributing to in building that will still be here in 30 years or a hundred years, a shift in our story from I consume.

[00:35:37] To I contribute would change how we use our time, our money, our attention. I think especially those humans that have arrived at this moment with considerable degrees of freedom of their time and resources, need to take the lead on, on that shifting story. And lastly, from intelligence to towards sapiens, wisdom.

[00:36:06] We are at a species level, rite of passage. Cleverness has served us well, but has also led us to a cliff and injured, hopefully not fatally the functioning

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capacity of our home. So instead of a culture asking, can we. a directional change towards wisdom. We might increasingly ask, should we, or if we do this, what might we break or screw up?

[00:36:32] It would be a humility and adulthood built from self-observation of humanity's history and impact, but also are untapped or, I would argue currently muzzled capabilities. I mean, we are the first. Of our species to be able to understand where we came from, how we got here, what we're doing, the impacts, what our natural resource balance sheet is, and what's possible so directionally apprenticing ourselves to reality.

[00:37:02] So our vast power serves life instead of erodes it directionally from cleverness towards wisdom.

[00:37:16] So I hope you can see this. This has not been a, checklist of things, but more of a compass directionally and a first draft compass at that I reserve the right to next year, re rejigger this and, try it again. But this is how I see, things at the moment. And to many of you, I'm sure these categories might sound overly utopian and compared to our current dystopian path, they are.

[00:37:46] But it is this species level journey that I'm trying to articulate here. and I hold all of these suggestions, lightly and I'm genuinely curious about what other of you think about these, because they're not rigid doctrines, but I think just directions to lean into, ahead of the changes coming our way.

[00:38:10] And because they're directions, if any of these feel too remote or difficult from where we stand now, then perhaps the task is to pursue things in a second derivative sort of way that directionally move us towards a place where these directions become more possible or more likely, even small directional changes today alter the initial conditions of the future.

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[00:38:36] To summarize away from single point failures and toward continuity, away from fake prices and towards biophysical honesty, away from bling and towards stewardship, away from heat, at least somewhat, and towards some semblance of the stability of the Holocene, away from fear and toward grounded agency.

[00:39:01] Away from me alone and towards us, and the us including the rest of the web of life. If enough of us move directionally in these ways, in, in governance, in technology, in civic life, in ecology behavior, and our own development as a species, this still will not solve the human and more than human predicament, but we will improve the odds that humanity and the biosphere.

[00:39:32] It can thread the bottlenecks, coming this century, and that what emerges on the other side is something we would still recognize as beautiful and worth the struggle. Personal autonomy and mental resilience on route to rocks in the river, on route to islands of coherence en route to better futures than the default in service of life.

[00:39:57] Thanks for watching and listening more soon.