

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] Good morning, another year under the belt of this podcast. on January 11th, 2026 will be the four year anniversary of this podcast, and we have taken very minimal breaks. over 200 episodes, a hundred frank's. I never thought I would be here. I never thought I would be a podcaster or that I would have enough to say beyond the general, premise of how energy, ecology, and human behavior fit together.

[00:00:43] But I think it's important to continue to, be a beacon for science tethered, systemic understanding. to share with other humans in the world that are trying to make sense and collectively, intervene towards better future than the default. So today I have some closing thoughts, that I will weave into some questions, sent by viewers, to our substack or to my email, or in conversation.

[00:01:17] And here they are. What is your theory of change? So, my theory of change has changed, in the last decade. I used to think, that voting, for the right people to make decisions would, shift the aircraft carrier. And I used to think that technology, the right technology, Would be able to change, the general game board.

[00:01:49] I used to think that policy and governance, were the central answers. I think we need all that, and, cultural zeitgeist change. But I actually think the, biophysical weight of our situation is now too heavy. and there will be a Simplification in the future. So increasingly, I, my theory of change is that emergence is going to play a role, and the focus of this podcast is to change the initial conditions of the future to be better than the default.

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[00:02:25] what that means is by education, by pilots, by projects, by relationships, by networks, by conversation. We are seeding, scenarios that become. Plausible and even probable that right now don't exist at all. so. I, think that is my general theory of change, but there's a logic to it. Increasingly, I think we start at the level of the individual where we have grounded agency in our lives, in our world, and, That starts with self-care, and all the things that I've been talking about. Sleep, exercise, nutrition, spaciousness and time, and, you know, kind of calming your nervous system from fight or flight, which naturally comes from learning about these things. self-care above that quite closely is we just did a class here and I think we're gonna redo it, in 2026 called Reality Base Camp.

[00:03:35] It's not about energy or ecology or climate change or money or economics or human behavior. It is about the Epistological Commons. It is about cognitive security, polarization, misinformation, how to have conversations, how to know, and have a filter for what information is true and not how to have different sources, both individual and media, and to really.

[00:04:03] Kind of in a transpartisan, non-political, meta modern sort of way. Look at and understand our situation without blame, and without, shouting and trying to be right, but actually have a better sense making capacity as an individual. So grounded agencies, self-care, a reality-based camp. And then I think, we need less, dependence on the economic Superorganism.

[00:04:37] And these individuals will gradually have more and more autonomy, in their behaviors, in their supply chains, in their networks. And from all that, I think. What will form, hopefully, and I increasingly think this is a priority of this channel, is to have these people around the world act as rocks in the river or leaders, in their organizations, in their communities, and then find the others.

[00:05:09] And once we begin to find the others that have this sort of toolkit and psychological physiological baseline, we start to have the possibility to have

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islands of coherence to use ia, E.O jean's, statement. And from those islands of coherence, maybe there's. Regional, continents of, coherence and I think it builds up from there.

[00:05:37] I'm really kind of becoming more and more opposed to strict lists of solutions, because it assumes that this is a binary A to B linear situation. I think we need a lot more raw material of. These type of humans in our society. and from then, other good things will happen. so I, like to think about the appropriate questions, the appropriate responses, and those start with, individual again to use bill term, ecological adults meeting others.

[00:06:21] okay. So, I'm gonna start my next point here by reading a couple of questions submitted by, on the Substack. Nate, how would you redesign national and global governance systems to better meet our current challenges? Here's another one. What specific steps can I make to simplify my own life? And a third, what is the most likely minimal bloodshed path back to a moral society?

[00:06:52] I had over a hundred questions, submitted for this, and I'll just give you my honest gut response to thinking about and reading those questions. I don't know. And, this platform is becoming more popular. We're approaching 300,000 total subscribers across platforms. and I'm happy that. More people in the world are paying attention and wanting to learn and be involved in these things, but the fact that I've spent almost 25 years understanding the connections between energy, ecology and human behavior does not qualify me to know the answers to all sorts of things.

[00:07:38] I'm just a guy in the Midwest who's very curious, cares about the world and I know a lot of people, I am not a guru. I am not a silver bullet to these things, and I will make a social contract with you right now. I am always gonna be me, Midwest Golden retriever, you know, Overton Window Biophysical Analyst.

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[00:08:07] I don't wanna be popular. I don't want to have some slick marketing, things. Yes, I want to grow, this channel because I think, my metric is if there are people out there who, if they knew of this podcast, they would listen to it. I wanna find those people. But I don't care about numbers, I don't care about metrics.

[00:08:30] I care about the community and the learning and the emergence of this network itself. so, Please continue to ask questions. There's a lot of things that I mention in a sentence that could be a 20 minute, frankly, and we'll try to do that next year. But I am, going to continually avoid getting over my skis as a human being.

[00:08:58] there are things I'm good at, and there are things I have no. Expertise at it all. and I will continue to remind myself of that, as we go forward. And please feel free to remind me as many of you often do. okay. what were the biggest learnings of the last four years that were unexpected?

[00:09:23] many, things. so first of all, I would say the reality base camp that I just mentioned. I used to think, oh, society is energy blind. We have to understand how dependent we are on cheap liquid, fossil carbon, and we're ecology blind. We don't realize that we're leaving the stability of the Holocene, and it's not just climate change, it's all the other things.

[00:09:50] I actually think that reality Basecamp and it precedes all else, which is understanding, information and how humans process things differently and how algorithms and, misinformation and different news sources actually capture our attention and then our beliefs. So I really think the epistemology of knowledge and making sense.

[00:10:18] Is way more important than I used to think. What else? So I used to think, at the peak of the carbon pulse, and peak oil and The Great Simplification, that everything would kind of be the same except we would have a lot wider and

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deeper poverty, and we would basically tighten our belts and it would be a consumption, haircut of let's just say 30 to 40%.

[00:10:48] but that everything else kind of stayed together. I, no longer think that, I think the focus, is going to be less on the reduction in consumption and more on the reduction in our freedoms and our say in what's going on in the world. And I was, and still am naive on politics and how Machiavellian and nasty it can be.

[00:11:16] but I think, The trend is towards wider and deeper poverty, but also in the futile, sense of a very small percentage of humans under our current default are gonna be calling the shots. And I'm not happy about that. I'm quite scared about that because reducing my consumption is, not so scary.

[00:11:42] While it is a little scary, Yeah, but that's manageable. but not having a voice, not having the ability to share what I'm thinking and my, analysis with other humans around the world. As one example. not being able to vote, living in an authoritarian either right, leaning or left-leaning, either one.

[00:12:04] That's very concerning to me. And I, do think the end of growth, for most people will result in that trajectory. what else? what are your current biggest fears and hopes that are non-obvious? Well, obvious ones are, I think nuclear war is among the highest risks our society has ever faced and is probably at the highest level ever.

[00:12:35] Right now. I don't talk about it a lot because I don't want to scare people on something. They don't have a lot of agency for. But it just seems we're careening into a risk escalation, situation. and I, do worry about that as well as, what's already been triggered in the climate feedbacks in coming decades and beyond.

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[00:13:02] But those are obvious. if you're paying attention, what's not obvious. I think we have a shrinking educational gauntlet. universities, more and more people are recognizing or, opining that they're not worth the investment. the social sciences are getting very uppity within universities and causing conflict.

[00:13:30] I'm kind of glad I left the University of Minnesota when I did because it's a minefield now to try and talk about reality and science, but more broadly than that. I feel quite strongly about telling the truth, at least the truth as I see it. And I fear that the gauntlet is such that the things that I or anyone might say that are both true and relevant to people's lives are going to be less and less able to be voiced without getting in trouble.

[00:14:08] and. This will probably be true no matter who is in office. but speaking truth to power is going to be difficult. I think we've taken it for granted in the west, in the United States, but many other places that care about the same things that we do on this platform aren't able to voice these things.

[00:14:28] So that's something I, care quite a bit about. What are their biggest fears? I picture this maelstrom, which is like a giant ball of yarn with neon things coming out of it, and flashy signals, which is the information and anger and fear in the world is gonna get louder and louder, and it's gonna pull us into that in a sympathetic nervous response of fight flight fear and the grounded.

[00:15:06] self-aware, altruistic pro-social educational beacon in the sky is, going to be much, much smaller relative to the maelstrom, and cacophony of fear-based. Media out there. I hadn't thought about that much in the past, but I see it unfolding and AI is gonna do that on steroids. what else are my biggest non-obvious fears?

[00:15:41] Oh, so there was this joke, I don't know if it was George Carlin or not, but there were people traveling and two people showed up at a party and they

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found out that they're Catholic and they're like, oh my gosh, I can't believe you're Catholic. And. You believe in the resurrection? Oh, yeah. Yeah. and they keep finding things that, they agree on and, they're really excited and, they're about to plan a Bible trip with their families.

[00:16:14] and then, one of them says, well, you also believe, In abortion, right? And the other's like, no, my body, my choice. And all of a sudden they hate each other and there's no more discussion. I don't think I told that joke quite right, but I think you get the point. I've noticed that in this space, there's so many people that care about earth's natural ecosystems and care about inequality and basic needs for people, and a more sane economic system.

[00:16:48] They agree on 95% of the things, but the one thing that they disagree about disrupts the entire relationship. And I see it in our networks all the time. And if we can't figure out a way to manage our interpersonal. Tolerance of disagreements and, even a recognition that, okay, with this person, I agree with them 95%.

[00:17:15] This other 5% I disagree. Okay, let's just work towards what we agree on. That doesn't seem to happen. a lot and I lament for humanity if we can't overcome that. And that's a microcosm of lots of our larger problems. And I've, seen this so many places in the last few years. Current biggest fears?

[00:17:44] Well, I'll be honest, and transparent. I'm gonna have knee surgery in a month. total knee surgery, like they cut the leg and put a new implant in. I'm quite scared about that, but I think it's the right choice for the next 20 years of my life. but all of a sudden, like every day that gets closer to that surgery, that is something that worries me.

[00:18:08] About in my own life, about as much as nuclear war. I'm sure it'll be fine, but, we may have some gaps in, in recording, at least, frankly, as we, we have a lot

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of podcasts in the cookie jar. More on that next year. Biggest non-obvious hopes? I don't love the word hope. I think in these discussions about the future, when we face the more than human predicament and all the constraints, that we're aware of on this channel, I think the word hope always has to be preceded by the word.

[00:18:46] Authentic or by reality based. and there are a lot of things to be hopeful about, but I think many people have their hopes consciously or subconsciously linked to an implicit continuation of modernity. And, as my friend Vanessa, has articulated, we are hoing modernity right now. And so there are many things to be hopeful about, as long as it comes from a place based in reality.

[00:19:27] as you know, I'm pro solar panel and wind turbine, as some, aspect, especially solar. But not to replace the 19 terawatt system we have now, and certainly not to hand wave around all the other things that need to be changed. I believe the energy transition is mostly not going to be about what kind of energy but our relationship with energy, with each other, with nature, et cetera.

[00:19:57] You know, the other thing I'm, hopeful about is a lot of the things that we are calling on to be done in the world. Are things we would want to be doing anyways, even if there wasn't a crisis on the horizon. clean water and healthy children and good education in a reasonable economic system and protecting the environment and caring about our children and grandchildren.

[00:20:27] And the oceans, and basic needs being met by people. I mean, these are the things that we should be advocating for anyways. Lastly, I get a lot of hope just from. Hearing the stories of the listeners of this show and just seeing this bubbling up of consciousness on what it means to be human, what it means to be alive today, and how many people are seriously onboarding that.

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[00:20:58] And I'm hopeful for the emergent conversation that comes from that. Okay. So looking ahead, to The Great Simplification. this channel's a little bit different because we're not just a climate change. We're not just about energy. We're not just about the economic system, more about human behavior.

[00:21:18] We're multiple topics, which makes it difficult. I, I don't wanna scale this to millions of people. Of course, I want to grow the podcast. And by the way, if everyone in the world knew this story the way that I'm telling it, that would become a self-fulfilling prophecy and people would start, hoarding.

[00:21:42] And a fear-based response would, likely happen. And I don't want that. I also don't want zero people to know about this. So there's some point in the middle where some sort of a pro-social Scout team prepares both physical things, but also educational thing and start pilots and that's what I want to.

[00:22:03] Influence. So the plans for this organization, the Institute for Study of Energy in our Future, and the podcast underneath it for 2026. We will continue the podcast, maybe not as many, every, Wednesday, but most Wednesdays. There's gonna be four categories, of the podcast. one is gonna be natural science, and you know, the actual environmental and other scientists.

[00:22:32] The second would be biophysical macro energy and the dollar and geopolitics. The third would be human behavior, individual and collective. Attention, addiction, meditation, grief, building, community, all those things. And the fourth category, which hopefully will grow over time, is what to do, both as individuals, as communities, as regions.

[00:22:56] And we're gonna highlight people that are actually doing things in addition to the podcast. The Frank's and I increasingly have, surprised myself by. I have a lot to say. I have a lot of Franks on deck. and I think what I might try to do

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is do two a week, one very short, five to eight minute riff or reflection on something.

[00:23:21] And then lately I've been doing these longer, video essays, which quite, it takes some prep, to understand. So I'm, I, do think it's important to. Not only understand energy, ecology and human behavior, but the, dots and the connections that hide within, in between them. we're also, again, going to promise to come up with this, reality 101, course, comprehensively professionally so that you can send this to people that don't have time to watch the podcast.

[00:23:58] as part of that will be the lexicon of the human predicament, which is a hundred, 150, very short. Two minute videos on different concepts relevant to our future. we're going to do some bespoke, gatherings and networking and interventions and to do all that we're going to be hiring. and, executive director, chief of staff, head of research, head of networking.

[00:24:25] and so I'll be posting ads for that on, LinkedIn probably soon. this is, Very rewarding to me to host these conversations. I learned so much from the podcast guests. And four years ago, before I started this, I thought I knew a lot and I now realize how little I actually knew. I can squint and see how the big picture fits together, but it's on each of the different topics.

[00:24:59] I continue to learn every week. I'm writing a draft, on a, frankly called the Fifth Law of Thermodynamics, where. Nature abhors a gradient. Humans also abhor a gradient. A gradient is from low entropy to high entropy or high altitude to low altitude, or hot to cold. And nature kind of travels down those gradients.

[00:25:26] Humans also travel down the gradient, from attention to boredom and, all the other things in our brain. And I'm reading about that and understanding it, and look forward to sharing that with all of you. So this was, just a brief summary of, my thoughts answering some of your questions.

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[00:25:49] I think this effort is important. I'm gonna continue it. Thank you for tuning in. Thank many of you for your financial support and keeping this, free for everyone in the world. We are not alive at, a boring time, and the stakes are quite high. And, Happy New Year to you all. to be continued, my friends.

[00:26:14] If you'd like to learn more about this episode, please visit The Great Simplification dot com for references and show notes. From there, you can also join our high low community and subscribe to our Substack newsletter. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stint and Lizzie Sirianni.

[00:26:37] Our production team also includes Leslie Ba Lutz Brady Hyen, Julia Maxwell, Gabriela Slayman, and Grace Brun. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you on the next episode. I.