

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] Good morning, long time. Viewers of this channel might expect me today to opine on Venezuela. the EOI of the heavy oil there, how it, combines with the light tight oil in the United States. the complexity and geopolitics of this recent news. But I'm not going to, 'cause it's not where my heart or mind or knee, is at.

[00:00:43] I'm gonna talk about. Something else. I have knee surgery in a few days, and despite its complexity, these type of surgeries are now considered routine and fixable, and I'm hella grateful for that. but my knee situation has also provided me an unexpected lens and perspective. because when a part of your body, in my case, a joint starts to not work, it suddenly rearranges your attention.

[00:01:23] It changes how I move, through the day, and it makes me plan things that I never used to plan, like stairs or walking on ice or getting out of a chair or a car. Or a long walk, which are now shorter, even turning over in bed. I have sworn expletives more in the middle of the night, in the last month in my entire life.

[00:01:47] Before that, don't think I ever did, swear in the middle of the night before that. And when I reflected on this, what surprised me most is not the pain. It's the way that normal suddenly felt far away. Because when a body functions normally. It's pretty much invisible. and so normal routines are something I want to get back.

[00:02:12] I don't want a new life. I don't want an upgraded life. I just want my not too long ago baseline. And that got me to thinking about other things that I, take for granted and that we generally in, in modern Western culture, take for granted.

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not as some gratitude performance, but more like. An inventory, a catalog of the things we take for granted.

[00:02:41] noticing the kinds of wealth that one only notices. When it happens that there's something wrong with them. And a knee is a small thing in the grand scheme, but in my case, at least so far, it's been a great teacher because it reminded me that so much of a human life depends on supports that we barely think about it.

[00:03:05] And once one notices that in your own body. It's hard not to notice it everywhere else. so today I wanna walk through a few layers on things that we take for granted, starting small and as usual, widening out. So health is the first one. Yeah, every time I've been sick, like with COVID or flu or something, it felt at that moment that you will always feel that crappy, and you just long and hope and pray and make little promises that if only you could feel better again.

[00:03:38] And once you're better, which is usually only in, in a few days, you completely forgot about the pain and the fever is thought and the promises because normal returned, whew. I never used to wake up and think, I am so grateful that my left knee works. Never. I just wake up, I stand up, I go make coffee, feed the ducks and start my day.

[00:04:04] And, health is strange that way. It's absolutely foundational to our lives, but it's also easy to forget or not notice until it isn't, and then it becomes a bottleneck to everything. It is hard to enjoy a conversation when a part of your body is screaming at you. It's hard to be present when you're wincing and bracing and thinking about it.

[00:04:28] it's hard to even think clearly when some part of your physical system, is trying to protect you. So that's the first layer, residing in a homo sapiens body

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that mostly works and the kind of normal that lets you forget we even have a body is something we, most of us, I think take for granted.

[00:04:52] And then you widen out a little and you hit basic creature comforts. there's a part of our lives that's so stable for many of us that we treat it like air. I woke up this morning, from a full night's sleep, granted with a few expletives when my knee got tweaked, when I rolled over, I had memory foam in a 65 degree basement.

[00:05:14] That's like a den with my three dogs. A safe place, for me to rest. I woke up hot water in the electric kettle for coffee, the internet to be informed about the world and Venezuela, refrigerator and clean water. I don't need to think about. And a nearby grocery store that might be boring compared to Whole Foods, but pretty much a Disneyland to any humans who have ever lived other than the past, generation or two.

[00:05:47] None of these things is guaranteed either historically or globally, but these things start to feel emotionally guaranteed when they've been stable For most of my life, for most of our lives, we stop treating all this as a some spectacular gift that it is and start relating to it as a baseline expectation of reality.

[00:06:11] And then suddenly if we lose any part of it, even briefly, it becomes obvious how much of our life experience was relying on these things. I don't think we realized how much psychological energy we're saving, but not worrying about things like temperature and safety and food and basic stability. so I think a big part of personal wealth.

[00:06:40] It's just reliability. It's a large portion of our real capital, I'd say. And that reliability in our system, and this is something we've talked about on, on this platform, is invisible right up until, it breaks. And then on top of that, there's the social version of that friends, family, community.

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[00:07:06] In my case, the broader TGS community. I am blessed to have many people in my life that I love and people who love me. people who check in, people who stay. My partner I've been with for almost 20 years. If you've ever been injured or sick, you know how quickly relationships stop being abstract and being really important.

[00:07:28] Someone has to drive you. Someone has to be patient with you. Someone has to listen to you, talk about the same worry over and over again, even especially if it's a knee, and still be kind. Someone has to make you laugh when you're taking yourself too seriously. And in my case, I also have non-human friends who I love and love me.

[00:07:50] This web of care is also a form of wealth, that we take for granted. and it could be the most important one. And a lot of us looking at me, only value and appreciate when we need it, has been that case in my life. Another layer. There's meaning meaningful work or meaningful contribution.

[00:08:14] Something that matters or at least feels like it matters in today's world. for many people, even having work is not guaranteed. And having work that feels aligned and important is even less guaranteed. And when you have really meaningful work at times, yes, it adds to more deadlines and messages and responsibilities, but if you step back, it's really astonishing to wake up and have something to do that feels important and real and the capacity to do it.

[00:08:53] so health comfort. People I love and who love me meaningful work that I'm passionate about these things. True riches in the deepest homo sapien sense all before 8:00 AM Isn't this like 90% of life right there? and then there's another layer more, subtle than all those, spaciousness. I can't remember the last time I woke up and didn't already have a long to-do list, or was filled with worry about some aspect of the world.

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[00:09:27] Maybe it's my personal temperament or the job description, but I think there's a freedom that we take for granted and not waking up feeling already behind or overwhelmed. And spaciousness is the feeling that time itself belongs to you. at least a little, at least with this job. When spaciousness does show up in my life, I've tended to fill it.

[00:09:55] I fragmented into tasks and phone calls and little dopamine errands. I don't feel guilty or anything. I just feel busy. But when spaciousness or some form of it disappears, I feel it. My body tightens, my mind loops. And my future starts eating my present and that tiny sense spaciousness. The ability to pause and reflect and do nothing is also a kind of internal wealth.

[00:10:30] which is fleeting and fragile. Last year, I recognized this and have promised myself in 2026 to build more spaciousness into my life, even at a cost of being less productive, less podcasts, less frankly. perhaps, which brings me to the layer that I've been thinking a lot about, in the past month or so.

[00:10:55] Ever since I did a podcast with Anna Lemke, attention is something that I've taken for granted. I think a lot of us do because the environment we've lived in for the last 20 or 30 years. if you're anywhere near my age, you've lived through a period where boredom was actually common and even frequent as a kid or a teenager, but basically has been non-existent as a default experience since the nineties.

[00:11:24] But today with social media and 24 7 news and podcasts and gadgets and AI chatbots and the entire dopamine smorgasbord available to us, any gap can be filled instantly when you're walking in a line or sitting in a car, or going in an elevator, even lying in bed, especially lying in bed. There is always an available feed.

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[00:11:52] There's always some news or a headline or a clip or a comment thread, which also I'm trying to read less of and always an email. So, last week I was on my phone, and a story popped up from Apple News, which I almost never read, but, it was about attention. So I clicked on it and it was a story referencing Anna Leke, who I believe is this week's guest.

[00:12:21] And I highly recommend you watch that episode. But in the article, Anna said that people who checked their phone a hundred times per day had an addiction that was often disruptive to their life. and in the article there were instructions on how to check on your phone, how many times a day you check your phone.

[00:12:43] And I did that and it was right at a hundred times a day. And some of that is due to me working outside and the nature of this job with all the various platforms and i's to dot and TD to cross. But somehow slowly, since I stopped teaching college five years ago, but pretty fully now, my phone captures more of my attention in my life than anything else.

[00:13:11] I'm not happy about that. when technology hijacks the default human condition like this. It then changes what your mind expects and it teaches your nervous system that silence or stillness or boredom are problems to be solved. I have, Both Sir Ian McGilchrist, scheduled again, as well as Sam Harris.

[00:13:40] And this question about the role of human attention, and how relevant it is to the more than human predicament we face is gonna be a central question that I ask both of them. So, one of the questions I've been holding is if life gets quieter again, what will I miss? And there's lots of ways this could happen.

[00:14:05] I'm sure you can imagine them. as well as eye gradual loss of complexity, a sudden loss of 24 7, access to the internet via some EEMP pulse or

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such, economic depression and the like, if something changes, if our electronic feeds become less available or less likely if we simply choose to step back.

[00:14:30] What would I might find myself longing for? Would I Ms. Bird song? The Sound of Wind in the trees, the smell of soil in an old growth forest, that deep, almost ancient calm that you can feel in a place that's been alive for a long time. Will I Ms. Long walks where my mind actually wanders and eventually settles on?

[00:15:03] Nothing particularly important. Will I miss staring out a window and letting my thoughts just make their own shapes with no end goal and mind. Or will I miss the constant simulation? I mostly have now the 24 7 news cycle. The sense of being plugged into everything relevant all the time, and the endless scroll that never ends because it never has to.

[00:15:31] And Aza Raskin, my friend, invented that endless scroll. the gift that keeps on giving. That question matters more than it seems because it points to what my nervous system has been trained to perceive as relief. But oftentimes what feels like relief is in reality, only distraction, and sometimes what we call boredom is actually the doorway back into full attention.

[00:16:04] And then the circle widens even further because underneath health, underneath Comfort, underneath spaciousness and Attention, there's the largest thing we take for granted. the Web of Life on planet Earth. The stability and majesty of the natural world and ecosystems that surround and support us. Most of human civilization was built inside a very unusual window of stability, which is why humans evolved and expanded the hollow scene a long stretch where seasons were dependable enough and climate swings were mild enough that agricultural and eventually cities and global trade, could take root.

[00:16:47] And that stability, is no longer a safe assumption. As followers of this podcast are aware, the latest update finds we've pushed seven of the nine major

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Earth system boundaries beyond the safe operating space. CO2 bad word in the United States, is at a record high with the largest one year increase on record was last year.

[00:17:13] And CO2 at this level. 429 PP m is usually associated with the POC in Earth's past around 3 million years ago, long before anything like human civilization existed. And, so when I say Web of life. I don't mean the scenery that we see between commutes or that we experience on vacations. I mean, the actual underlying ecological conditions that make normal life feel normal.

[00:17:47] And if those conditions get less stable, everything else gets less stable, all at the same time. Food and the ability to buy insurance and infrastructure and politics, everything, phrase, and because of this anxiety will rise, because future ecological stability was something we took for granted. My knee has been a small reminder that normal can vanish very quickly, and I think the planet is giving us the same lesson at a much different scale.

[00:18:27] Longtime viewers, of this program will expect that I stop here because of the living world and our nieces and nephews and cousins in nature really are my true North compass. But there's one more lens, even wider on what I think we take for granted. The widest lens for me, knowing what I know now, and I am continually learning, is autonomy or some form of personal sovereignty.

[00:18:58] And by this I mean the ordinary freedom to live a life that is reasonably self-directed. I can wake up. And decide what I will do with my time, where I will go, what I will work on, and now in the first week in January with my, new Year's resolutions, what kind of person I will want to be and try to be.

[00:19:23] And most days, all this feels like the background condition of being alive. But if we're honest, it is not the background condition of human history and

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it is not guaranteed going forward. A lot of us are drifting towards a world where life feels less self-governed and more like living under someone else's terms.

[00:19:48] And when wealth and infrastructure and data and compute all concentrate, the rest of us can end up living inside systems we do not control and are paying rent just to participate in basic life. And the rent's not only money. It could be access or reputation or compliance. It's lots of things. It can be the quiet feeling there.

[00:20:12] There are rules, that you did not vote for. enforced by systems that we have no appeal to. And if you're following the news, less than 100 checks per day surveillance makes it easier to watch people and ai. Makes it easier to do that everywhere all the time. And then the rules of life can start changing without a vote, without consensus, and without any real conversation.

[00:20:45] Because more and more decisions get made by systems that will never meet or let alone understand. You can still feel free, but your options and choices have quietly, shrunk. That's why I put autonomy or even sovereignty at the widest lens. It's not the same as attention. Attention is what we notice.

[00:21:10] Autonomy is what we can actually do. So maybe that's the final thing. we take for granted, not health or comfort or the web of life, but the ability to live a life that is genuinely your own in a century. That is getting better at turning human beings into managed populations.

[00:21:34] I will close with no, grand solutions or advice, but with some questions for you to consider. What part of your life is so stable that you've stopped seeing it? Which people in your life are you grateful for, and what might you remember to thank them for? If the electronic world went quiet for a week or a month, what would you miss first and what might you start to notice again?

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[00:22:08] Where in your life do you need more spaciousness, even if it costs you some loss in productivity? And what does it look like in practical terms to protect your freedom, to steer your own life? I will talk to you, hopefully on the other side of surgery where I predict even this new perspective shared today, might change in unexpected ways.

[00:22:35] Happy New Year. much love to you all.