

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] Good morning. A week ago this morning, my original human knee was replaced with a titanium one and a little bit of cobalt. So technically I am now a cyborg. I've called, modern western human cyborgs for a while because our lives already run on external, stimuli, external muscles from our tech and external minds, from our phones and AI and everything else.

[00:00:30] Just made it literally true, in my case. a week out, things are going well. and I just wanted to offer some, brief wide boundary reflections, from the, opiate induced, recovery and spaciousness, of the last seven days.

[00:00:56] First of all, Oh my gosh, I have a body. was a big reflection. I think. as I mentioned in the last, frankly, we take our bodies for granted. I will no longer do that. on day three, I got out of bed, stood up, and there was a lightning strike of pain in my leg. and it just hyperfocused my attention to my physical body.

[00:01:22] And there are so many of us, well, so many people that I personally know. I can't speak for you, the view. following the more than human predicament that are very much in their minds. and this was a hella powerful example, reminder for me to reside in my body first And the mind, is an extrapolation of that.

[00:01:51] much appreciation for this now 99. 0.5%, original homo sapiens physical body. the other thing, the other reflection I'd like to share is the spaciousness that this week has, provided I had no calls scheduled for the first time in five years. even when I'm on vacation, I have calls scheduled.

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[00:02:16] So I did something that I have not done in. 25 years. I read two books this week. Not finished with both, but mostly finished. I read the JRR Tolkien, Lord of the Rings, the Fellowship of the Ring, the first book. In large print because, it was a return gift from my father who I bought it for. Dad, you're probably watching.

[00:02:45] love You and thanks for watching every one of these episodes. the second book was Paul King's Norths, against the Machine on the Unmaking of Humanity. These were books I wanted to read, and I didn't realize how linked they would be, in spirit and in wide boundary implications. Paul, who was the co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project and is a poet, such a beautiful writer, I hope all of you can read this important book.

[00:03:20] He writes about the machine as a civilizational force that. Turns creatures into components. He does a very historic overview of the other philosophers and thinkers that, are observing the Superorganism like qualities of the not individual humans, but at scale what we do. And it really dovetailed a lot with my own work.

[00:03:50] The economic Superorganism talks about the energy material, financial realities of this machine. And Paul goes into it a lot more on the spiritual side. And I think his in book, entirely revolves around a quote, by Wendell Berry, which naturally I don't have in front of me while I'm doing this video.

[00:04:10] But it was along the lines of the humans in the future will have to decide whether we want to be creatures. Machines. next week I'm talking to Ian McGilchrist and I, really do think there's a left brain meme cancer, virus that has taken over our, species and has turned us in aggregate into a machine.

[00:04:39] I was really. As someone who wrote academic papers on the energy and complexity of the modern Superorganism, I was unaware of how far back this

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thinking went with people like, Louis Mumford and others. but Paul's book was, a treat, linking the two books, the Lord of the Rings. Which by the way, I read when I was 15 and I read it again when I was 28 or something after a big breakup.

[00:05:11] it's weird to now read it after the movies came out because when I'm reading the lines, I imagine in Elijah Wood and Viggo Mortensen and Liv Tyler, in my mind when they're saying the character's words, I don't like that. I like the. Untrodden snow, of the virtual world in our minds, imagining what these people might look like.

[00:05:34] So it was like I had this visual, narration in my mind. But other than that, I'm, I got, as I'm much older, I got a lot out of it and enjoyed it. The linkage between the two books is they're both about the fact that, the spirit of humanity or hobbit. is in contrast to the larger, systemic backdrop.

[00:06:04] And it really, both of them talk about, not explicitly the way that I frame it, but the battle between life and power. And early 2026, we see power manifesting in so many ways, especially with AI and, the quest for more electricity to power it. so it was good to read, and to read these two books.

[00:06:33] So this week, I got to experience. My oldest thesis that fossil energy combined at a massive global scale with technology is indistinguishable from magic at a very personal level. I experience this because a titanium knee is what this kind of looks like when the spell is applied to one's own body.

[00:06:57] Star Trek Enterprise, operating room with nine people, all wearing sterile blue outfits and all the machinery. It was a reminder that this magic comes with an invoice. not only my insurance company paying for it, but mines and supply chains and sterile rooms, and a lot of invisible reliability, and undoubtedly a lot of waste.

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[00:07:25] It's wake, but it's pretty freaking amazing. I am one week out and I can walk slowly without a cane, without a walker. I have a lot of work ahead of me to recover. I am highly motivated to recover. I am signing up for bike races this summer. and I'm sure I, you know, barring my dogs jumping on me or something, I'm on the road to recovery.

[00:07:57] There is a wide boundary version of modern technology that is genuinely beautiful and lying in the recovery room and this.

[00:08:11] I critique technology a lot, and the Superorganism and the cul-de-sac that our culture is headed towards. but there's also goodness underneath it, because this technology and the tools associated with, Could be subordinated to care. we could use this complexity to protect the vulnerable and the web of life.

[00:08:41] And the problem that I see is the same system that can rebuild a broken knee, or an arthritic knee, can also rebuild, an entire society around competition and distraction and dependence and eco side. So it was not lost on me that I am a creature within the machine and I benefited. Hugely from the machine, but in a wider boundary sense.

[00:09:14] If you believe in the themes of this channel, and if you're watching this, you probably do. There will be goodness coming from the machine. In my tiny example. I will be more effective at my work. I cannot function if I don't get 90 minutes of physical exercise a day. I just can't. My brain can't fire at the level required.

[00:09:35] Now I will be able to bike this summer. And do all the thoughts and work the long hours. So it think of all the good things that the machine is supporting, at least supporting the initial conditions for all of you around the world, working on the things you're doing inside the machine. We can criticize it.

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[00:09:58] We can deconstruct it, but it also is shining a path and making it available to do the hard and necessary and important work, where we have more goodness in the default of the more than human predicament, and we are going to need goodness. I would be remiss, or feel. Some shame if I didn't at least bring this up, that the hospital where I had this surgery was right near the epicenter of the ice controversy going on, in Minneapolis.

[00:10:40] The current ice controversy is pretty much an apt microcosm for our broader cultural and institutional fragmentation. People across the country are watching the exact same footage, they're reading the same headlines, and they're arriving at radically different conclusions about what is happening and what it means.

[00:11:00] And I don't sense that the divergence is only political or ideological. It reflects the deeper fractures in how legitimacy. Information, authority and trust are interpreted in our global machine, which is under incredible stress at the moment. Unfortunately, I've been away mostly from the news, which was also a gift.

[00:11:27] healing from my surgery. But the immediate thing that shouted loudly to me, even with a cursory look at the headlines of this situation, is as we move into energy, credit, complexity, and governance, speed bumps in the coming decade, the gradient between federal power. State and local responses is steepening and unfortunately is unlikely to, lessen.

[00:11:52] And history suggests that when systems are stressed, power ultimately consolidates. Somewhere. And the open question, that came unbidden in an opiate haze on Friday or Saturday morning was where, is power gonna consolidate in the United States? What does our future look like if authority remains primarily centralized at the federal level, but what does it look like if power devolves to states and local?

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[00:12:27] And if it's that.

[00:12:34] In a post peak carbon world, what is the unifying story that keeps 50 very different states aligned toward shared goals and institutions and defense systems and financial systems and structures? And I've long thought that bio regionalism could be one possible answer, or at least one worth serious consideration.

[00:12:54] And. I expect this sounds fringe today, but given the direction of the constraints unfolding in our world and the story that I've been researching and sharing for years, I don't think it's gonna continue to be fringe. Okay, moving to the core reason why, I chose to record a frankly, in the midst of my, rehabilitation.

[00:13:21] My, my much of my life is rehabilitation in the, midst of my recovery. I'm a creature, now, I guess technically part cyborg that is living inside a machine, a global economic Superorganism. I think my job is to actively, purposefully remain a creature in Wendell Berry's sense, even as I benefit.

[00:13:47] From the machine, and those of you that have watched, my presentations over the years know that one of the, recommendations I give near the end is to distinguish between conditional goals and unconditional goals. Conditional goals are things that, might. Be disrupted if something happens in Venezuela or Davos or Greenland or, different politician or financial event happens in the world.

[00:14:16] Unconditional goals are things you control yourself. no matter what happens in the broader world, it's something that you are responsible, you have agency over, you control. So with clarity and resolve, I'm going to set a few creature commitments, for the next phase of my life. you know, some of them are pretty basic that I'm already doing.

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[00:14:43] Just more committed walking outside every day, spending time in nature, fewer screens in the evening. More physical boredom might, might be a good one. I'm pausing here because I'm, nervous about what I'm about to say because, if you make a commitment, there's a bug on my microphone. if you make a commitment to yourself, it's not as, high stakes is if you make it.

[00:15:13] To, tens of thousands, of, other people. but that even makes it more resolved and more likely to happen. I am committing because other than biking 150 miles a week in the summer and late spring and early autumn, and digging potatoes and chopping and stacking firewood, I've never lifted weights in my life.

[00:15:39] Well, I have probably 20 times, where I start for a week or two and then give up. I am committing this creature, this body is committing to lifting weights three days a week going forward. Full stop. So many people have said that at my age, this is essential to maintain, strength and flexibility and metabolism.

[00:16:01] And I know I will be better. The work will be better. Everything ahead of us will be better for me and the broader influence if I follow through on this. So starting today, I'm gonna. Take up lifting weights, dumbbells, barbells, and the like, for the first time in my life, a commitment now made socially, boy, can I imagine the shame when I meet people at some meeting in August.

[00:16:34] Nate, I remember that frankly, back in January. Dude, you still look like the stay puff marshmallow man. well. A line in the sand, because of the knee surgery, I want my default state to be inhabiting my body, not escaping it.

[00:16:55] I'll close here with a, a. A famous quote, which in my opinion is in a wide boundary sense, a gift of goodness with a time delay from the much smaller, less global Superorganism of the 1940s. When JRR Tolkien was writing the fellowship of the Ring. I wish it need not happened in my time. Said Frodo and Gandalf answers in the only way that Gandalf can.

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[00:17:23] So do I and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All that we have to decide is what to do with the time that has given us. 2026 I suspect is a year when decades may happen within weeks. I have an enormous amount of content and perspective planned. I am committed to bearing witness.

[00:17:50] To what's unfolding and sense making, and at least softly, directionally helping people intervene with the more than human predicament. Next week will be a long form video on the Jekyll and Hyde Nature of Humanity. And scale, which looks at the symptoms, patterns and core drivers, of our situation.

[00:18:14] But soon after that, I'm, gonna get deep into scenarios and planning and shortfall risk. And the core goal post for the work of this organization, this year is gonna be expanding the networks and interventions for the more than human predicament. To my fellow creatures inside the machine. I hope that you'd also can find a few practices that make you harder for the machine to mechanize, practices that return you to your body, to your local place, to your people.

[00:18:53] 'cause even inside a system that often treats us like components we're not components. And perhaps maybe that was Tolkien's deepest gift, and why his movies and books are still so popular today. The true resistance to Mordor and Soran wasn't strength or military or technology. It was the preservation of the shi.

[00:19:21] And the hearts and the spirits of the stubborn, nondescript, soft spoken commitments to ordinary life. By Hobbits, and to the kind of hearts that a machine could never manufacture. and I think, you know, that's the message of Ian McGilchrist, that we've kind of have this left brain virus in our species that has.

[00:19:54] Tilted us towards becoming a machine, and this is a species level rite of passage. And I know there are many creatures out there who recognize the importance of being a creature, not a machine. And I'm happy to be sharing. This

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time on this spinning Bluegreen Earth with those of you paying attention to this story.

[00:20:20] I will see you next week. Thank you.