

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. We have been talking about systemic risks for a long time on this platform, and now they are upon us the operation Epic Fury by the USA and Israel. it's not only a market changing event, it is. Probably a world changing event and I could be another talking head, opining on how long the Strader Horror Muse will be closed and what this portends for oil and gas prices and what it means for Europe and China and the US and our economic system.

[00:00:37] These are all scenarios that I've been outlining for many, years. And my surface reaction this morning, Wednesday, March 4th, was to speculate on what's ahead even with large air bands. And I probably will do something like that after the weekend in a wide boundary news update. But my deeper instinct is this, This channel, this platform exists to inform and inspire those humans who wanna play a role in what's coming. And given what's coming could soon be here. I wanna start a new series today on, staying Human tentatively the title. staying Human in these times. Effectively, what do we do? But not a checklist.

[00:01:28] More of a guide on how we might live and contribute in this age of, turbulence and rapid change. All the news seems to be bombs and blood and gangsters and ai and some days, an ordinary morning, like this morning can kind of feel like a Twilight Zone episode. And if you're like me. You probably periodically get caught between vertigo and whiplash, following the news.

[00:02:06] And by like me, I don't mean my personality or the, peculiarities of Sasquatch self. I just mean having a base humanity of liking things like soup and old growth forest and the smell of. Freshly washed babies and clean laundry and unforced, open laughter with friends and golden retrievers. well all dogs.

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[00:02:40] and the deep awe of the natural world. That's what I mean by like me. And I think a lot of you are like me, but like me, you also have a hope for normal. times that make sense. an era where hard work and creativity and kindness and cooperation can lead you and us somewhere. it doesn't feel like we're in those times.

[00:03:11] So let's take a big step back. Many of you are curious. Concerned, sometimes afraid, trying to keep up. But I've learned that more and more information without a way to act, becomes a psychological weight, and it accumulates like stress hormones. It keeps circulating in our bodies. So this series, which since I'm starting post-haste, I'm gonna choreograph as I go, is about how to take in the magnitude of the more than human predicament, retain your humanity while living inside what increasingly we recognize like an unfeeling machine.

[00:03:57] And still play a role in steering the future away from the default, ahead of us. So here's part one.

[00:04:17] There is a word I used to roll my eyes at, but the logic and implications of this work keep leading me back to it. And that word is. Agency for a long time. I skipped over it. When I heard it, it sounded kind of buzzwordy and abstract. but today the concept of agency feels more practical, almost physical, and now necessary.

[00:04:44] And when I say agency, I mean the lived experience that some part of your life. Is yours, your attention is yours. Your time is yours, and at least for parts of your day, you can choose what you do next. And that choice connects you to reality in a way that changes something. And I expect many people are craving this right now, even if they don't use that word.

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[00:05:14] they say they want meaning or community or more authenticity and that they see, say they feel tired or directionalist and, unable to focus or to have motivation, but they're not sure why. And I think underneath these descriptions, there is a deeper craving for the feeling we once had and many of us have lost that we are the authors of our own days, of our own lives.

[00:05:49] So this'll be part one of a series. I'm gonna call staying Human part one because reclaiming that feeling of agency. I think is a precondition for almost everything else that follows. And the more than human predicament is not only external climate and energy and biodiversity and geopolitics, it's also internal.

[00:06:10] It's a test of whether enough humans can direct attention and effort towards the longer term, even while the system increasingly pulls us towards the short term. For much of my life, I believe the main bottleneck to better futures was knowledge and understanding. If people could only see reality clearly, then we as a culture would respond in kind.

[00:06:35] I called my college course Reality 101 Reality Matters, and I still believe that. But over time, my mental model of how society works as well as my own theory of change has. Changed and about a decade ago, I started seeing the economy less as a collection of individual humans and more as a metabolic Superorganism and almost living system that consumes energy and materials and turns them into goods and services, and then has to keep consuming to keep itself going.

[00:07:17] Kinda like a shark needs to keep swimming to breathe. And despite our critique of them, many of the biggest patterns embedded in the Superorganism were never explicitly chosen by most of the people living inside it was like what's happening in the Middle East this week? They widen, they persist.

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[00:07:41] Increasing debt year over year becomes like the sun rising in the morning Surveillance. Undergoes kind of a shifting baseline sort of dynamic until it's normal to have everything we do tracked and analyzed. And of course, ecological drawdown, continues even as we profess to really care about it. So this Superorganism metabolizes the future into the present.

[00:08:10] And many days we as individuals frantically are treading water, just not to be swept away in the current. This creates a very particular psychological condition watching something we did not consciously choose yet being pulled along in its wake. So where does agency fit in to this story? Our society, our modern culture, especially in the West, has trained us to think of agency as a sort of ritualized participation.

[00:08:48] We get a concentrated dose of it every few years at the ballot box, and we get smaller doses through consumption, through our social media posting, through having the correct opinion at the correct moment. Yeah, I think elections matter. I'm not dismissing, voting and elections. My point is that formal participation and lived agency in our culture have now seriously drifted apart.

[00:09:19] We are asked to care deeply about outcomes that we have almost no leverage over, and at the same time, the information age. Is amplifying our awareness of all the things faster than our collective capacity to intervene and act. But here's the thing, when awareness grows, an agency does not a sort of paralysis sets in, and that gap produces cynicism and shame and.

[00:09:58] Something that feels close to, moral injury. People sense the magnitude of our predicament and they also sense their smallness inside of it. And then they feel wrongly, in my opinion, that their inability to change it is some sort of a personal defect. Guilt and shame and resignation show up and when shame takes hold.

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[00:10:27] People often respond by signaling purity or becoming overly certain and dogmatic, or by withdrawing entirely people's nervous systems learn that action is costly and exposure is risky, so people can end up being hyper aware. And immobilized at the same time and at the macro level, that combination makes us easier to steer because it keeps people in reaction mode instead of proactive mode.

[00:11:04] I increasingly think that many of us now live in a kind of soft feudalism. Yeah, we have comfort and convenience and entertainment and abundance of choice in the narrow consumer sense. At the same time, there are walls and gates around us built out of institutions and incentives, ownership patterns, and the hard physics of a globally interconnected carbon smorgasbord, energy intensive way of life.

[00:11:32] And those walls in, in an Orwellian sense, we call freedoms in our culture, but for those paying attention, they increasingly look like prison gates. Which is a new way of seeing our system. For me, this is why I think that felt helplessness. The feeling that nothing we can do makes a difference, is increasingly one of the biggest hurdles we face in the more than human predicament.

[00:11:59] Because any serious response to the predicament at the personal or community or institutional scale, let alone global scale, is gonna require human capacities that this helplessness. Has gradually eroded like choice. Sustained attention. Cooperation and follow through at the level of the individual.

[00:12:25] and all this has scientific grounding. as an evolutionary adaptation, our brains are constantly estimating the controllability of our environment below our consciousness. Your nervous system keeps asking, when I try, does anything change? And if the answer is yes, or if the answer is yes, reasonably often stress shifts into active coping, which is a positive thing for our physiology.

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[00:12:54] You feel the pressure, but also there's some traction that accompanies it. But if the answer becomes no freeze and withdrawal become. Our normal responses because energy conservation is rational, if the environment is deemed by our brains uncontrollable. And the term for this is learned helplessness. And I think at civilizational scale, we are now running an experiment in it and a population that is hyper informed.

[00:13:31] But kind of behaviorally immobilized is much easier to steer because reaction by the constituent parts of the Superorganism replaces what was once our, directed behavior and research on self-efficacy is basically the longer term version of this same concept. It's evidence accumulated over time.

[00:13:59] That your own actions lead to outcomes, and the strongest builder of that evidence is not some uber self-confidence as a human personality trait. It's what researchers call mastery experiences, which is a fancy term for small wins that are measurable and real. You attempt something concrete, you complete it.

[00:14:25] You see an outcome and your brain updates its model of you who you are. I first learned about this, two years ago in a book by BJ Fogg called Tiny Habits. It's basically a method for making the first step small enough that you're almost guaranteed to succeed, so your nervous system gets a better proof.

[00:14:51] Instead of another broken promise. And that update to your own self-perception matters because it potentially changes what you do next and in the future. And in my experience, when you string a few experiences together in a row, you become more willing to try again, more willing to tolerate discomfort, and maybe more able to stay with something longer.

[00:15:20] And start to invest your time and energy again. But when you develop the opposite pattern, your intentions repeatedly dissipate. Especially today in a

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digital environment designed to fragment our intention, your system learns that effort is unreliable and to not invest time or discipline or effort.

[00:15:46] So. Long-winded introduction to get to this point. a practical suggestion. Here is simple. In an environment that constantly dissolves our intentions, because of the biophysical macro framework that brought us here, we wanna create at least one small protected loop of agency between our intention and an outcome.

[00:16:16] A promise that you keep, a block of time, that you don't rationalize away. And over time those kept promises rebuild. Trust in you as a human. And self-trust is a key foundation for agency. And I think given all of you that are paying attention to the same story I am, agency is the foundation of everything else.

[00:16:47] So I humbly suggest if you wanna measure your real agency, don't list out your knowledge and opinions and worldview. Instead, just look at your calendar maybe from last week. 'cause time is the interface between our values and our world, and your calendar is a biophysical document. It reveals where your energy and life force is flowing.

[00:17:14] What did you protect? What did you allow to dissipate and what did you do, that reinforced your capacity to act again tomorrow? There are days, to be honest, like today, when I feel the weight of the world and what's happening, and I see the headlines about war and social turbulence and political dysfunction.

[00:17:43] And as most of you are acutely aware, there is also the mostly signed ecological dec decay going on in the background tracking Iran or global heating or global debt, or fill in the blank situation of your, metris flavor du jour can quietly become a substitute for acting in my own life. I tell myself I'm staying informed

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while my day becomes more fragmented and reactive, and I think understanding the details of the more than human predicament is kind of asymptotic.

[00:18:24] We can learn more and more, but like a pot of gold under a rainbow there. There is no end. I am or, should say, I have been the king of rationalizations. My neocortex can make grand, well-intended, healthy plans for next week on my calendar, but when that appointment time arrives, the emotions or events of the moment.

[00:18:53] I somehow perpetually turn tomorrow into today and then delay and rationalization ensue and my agency muscle atrophies. So in the past year or so, I've started interrupting this pattern before it captures, and defines me. And so my little Nate, or the mega metacognitive Nate on my shoulder speaks up and kindly nudges me to choose an alternate behavior before I touch a screen.

[00:19:26] Like, like putting in a voluntary speed bump in my day. Sometimes it's sitting quietly talking to my dog for a few minutes, or doing an elephant path meditation that my, my friend sent me on WhatsApp. Often it's stopping mid article and abruptly and actively choosing to watch the birds at my feeder.

[00:19:53] another thing I do is pull out my notebook and I physically write a poem with a pen. and. Sometimes I have a lot of phone numbers on my phone. It's just randomly calling a friend and having a real conversation with someone I haven't talked to in a while, and I've learned that the specific thing doesn't so much matter.

[00:20:18] What matters is reclaiming the felt experience of my own choice, and then having my nervous system learn and repeat the. Behavior and the feeling. I honestly believe from that seed, bigger things become possible, including the kinds of interventions this platform exists to explore and activate. And if you've

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been with this platform for a while, you probably frequently are asking the same thing that I ask, what do we actually do about the meta crisis?

[00:20:54] And I have thought about this for a very long time, and I plan to share a more detailed map of the interventions, in the coming months, personal and local, ecological and, institutional. And there are many entry points and many forms of work that are going to matter. There is so much to do starting yesterday, but today I am focused on what I view as a precondition to all that, reclaiming some of the agency.

[00:21:28] That we've lost or outsourced to the Superorganism. And yeah, some of you are probably thinking and will write in the comments that more agency is not gonna guarantee we solve the metris or even make a dent. The system's huge. Inertia is real, and quite a bit of damage is already locked in. But agency changes whether we regain influence over our own lives first.

[00:21:56] Then the local communities we touch, it then changes the odds that new collaborations can form that. Better policies emerge, that local experiments scale, and then many other possibilities, from that. So agency is the first step towards changing the initial conditions of the future and regarding the future, I think there's a big difference between the default future trajectory of humanity and the biosphere and.

[00:22:22] Each of our perceptions of it. The default future is not a fixed destiny. It is and always will be a probability distribution and for example, any improvement over the default, is a great outcome. If we stop at 2.1 degrees Celsius of global heating in the future, that will be immeasurably better for the long term than 2.2.

[00:22:52] 5 million species. Making it through this century is immeasurably better than 4.8 million. Small differences look small on a chart, but will be enormous in time and space. This is what I mean by changing the initial

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conditions of the future. More people with a feeling of agency can, and I expect will nudge these curves, but none of that happens without people.

[00:23:21] Lots of people who feel their individual daily actions have of some tether to reality. So before institutional change, before cultural shifts, before new energy systems, there are nervous systems that are gonna have to relearn this traction. That in my opinion, our system has quietly taken away. So here's what I will offer as a first step with all my vast experience on the topic.

[00:23:53] Pick one hour in the next three days that belongs to you. Put it on your calendar, and if you're like me and you need to, and treat this hour as a commitment to your future self, and during that hour do something. That increases your agency. You could work out, strengthen your body or stabilize your nervous system, or breathe some authenticity into a real relationship in your life, or make some small anticipatory ninja move that makes you harder to steer.

[00:24:31] It's up to you. But it should be your choice, not an appointment with someone per se. And if an hour is too much, try 10 minutes or five tiny habits if you're feeling frozen or guilty or ashamed or powerless these days, I wanna say this plainly. You are not alone and you are not broken. Neither am I.

[00:25:04] I've spent 20 years mapping the biophysical systems of humans and the biosphere circa 2026, and I've become very comfortable in that space. probably mostly because it's now obvious what's happening to most people, but the inner life side of this. I'm a participant and a novice learning in real time alongside many of you, in some cases from some of you, which is exactly why I think we need better conversations about how to stay human inside a super organism that doesn't optimize for humanity or, even care about it.

[00:25:50] And that's what this series is gonna be about, individuals building. Towards becoming rocks in the river, collectively towards islands of coherence,

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and then toward some new cultural mitochondria of better futures than the default. Okay. That was a mouthful. That's all for today. you might, note that I am, quite tired, because all the things going on in the world.

[00:26:22] I hope this made sense. And I'll build on it in the future. I would love to hear from the TGS community on your experience of this little suggested experiment on agency here and what else you do to stay human in these times more soon in this series. Hope you all are well.