

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. I am freshly showered and ready to have a three hour podcast on thermodynamics and civilization with Tad Patek, and I have a few minutes to record a timely. Frankly, on uncomfortable questions.

[00:00:30] The first uncomfortable questions episode was about our general trajectory, and this one, based on current events, is more immediate. or at least it feels that way. And again, with these sorts of episodes, I invite you to discuss these questions in a group. And after the last one, I got numerous emails, including pictures of people in groups and convenings, discussing the questions.

[00:01:00] And also some Frank's or even podcasts. And this was. It's super encouraging to hear because it will take a village, and lots of them. And that's really what we're doing here is, extending and normalizing the conversation, about our system and what's ahead. So the Iran situation has reminded many people that what looks like geopolitics on the surface and from a distance, might very quickly become.

[00:01:32] Things like supply chain disruptions, price inflation, fear, and even polarization and renewed stories about enemies and allies and who's in the ingroup and who's in the outgroup. No one knows, and we can't know how this is gonna end, but as I mentioned in Tuesday's wide boundary news, hopefully it resolves sooner and in less bad ways, than.

[00:02:00] More bad ways. but amidst all the fear and uncertainty moments like this, I think can be clarifying. At least they are for me. 'cause they remove this certain veil, cultural trance and they reveal. What we have assumed to be stable and what we depend on without really noticing and even what narratives and

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stories that our psychologies reach for when systems all of a sudden feel dangerous.

[00:02:38] So at these times, when it's all in the news and we're becoming more aware of it, these things shift the problem from being out there and at least conceptually land on our front porch, at home. So here in the next installment are five more uncomfortable questions for unsettled times. So one of the strange things about modernity is that most of us do not really understand or acknowledge which parts of it are essential and which parts we just treat as familiar global trade.

[00:03:18] highly dense and complex supply chains have made our lifestyles. Today feel normal, like this is the way it's always been and will be. But through a systems lens, I think many of us know, they're actually quite temporary. And this becomes apparent when a disruption far away shows up as. An absence here.

[00:03:43] Not always immediately, but eventually. And when that happens, what matters is not only what we consume, but what we suddenly cannot imagine being without. So to the question, if global supply chains were forced to simplify quickly due to the strain of Horus or any other, bottlenecks, what are three things you could not do without or, would deeply miss?

[00:04:12] And what are three things that you could reduce the consumption of now before scarcity, price or panic makes that choice for you? I don't think this is a purity argument, but a practical one, which is different for each of us. Second question, for very understandable evolutionary reasons, when conflict or hardships escalate, one of the first things that human mind wants.

[00:04:45] Some sort of a clean hierarchy of blame. Who caused this? Who started it? Who deserves condemnation? And sometimes these questions matter and even matter a lot. In the recent Jekyll and Hyde episode, I laid out a systems

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overview of the predicament that we are in. And one thing that perspective tends to do is complicate.

[00:05:09] The blame hierarchy, not because no one's responsible or has an outsized role, but because cause and effect in a system this large is usually more distributed than our individual human moral instincts, want it to be. But there's another question underneath all this, and it's closer to the spirit of what I'm trying to do here with this channel.

[00:05:35] What does the act of assigning blame do to our own nervous systems, to our perception and our capacity for response and responsibility? so to the question. Whose fault do you think the major destabilizing events of the world, is right now? And after giving your answer, how does that answer make you feel?

[00:06:05] More clear, more helpless, more angry, more, morally certain. There's a signing blame. Increase your capacity for meaningful action, or mostly give some shape to your current distress. And a related question, are we searching for blame in order to assign accountability or to relieve ourselves of responsibility and the resulting agency?

[00:06:45] question three. There are many people outside the United States and even inside the United States who are rooting for the end of the American Empire or even for the collapse of US dominance in the world. Some feel this because of wars and coups and sanctions and hypocrisy and ecological damage and treaty violations, or the long pattern of demanding a rules-based order while selectively exempting oneself from this rules.

[00:07:20] These critiques are not hard to find, and they're rooted in some truth, but there's another lens here that demands us to ask a much harder. And in my opinion, much more important question with the collapse of the United States as a global power, be net positive or net negative for the world, not morally

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satisfying for some people in the short, immediate run, linking back to my prior question, but materially and systemically over the following decades and beyond.

[00:07:59] Whichever side you fall on in such a speculation, consider what would fill such a vacuum of power and coordination. And it does always get filled. And why are you confident that what? It would be better than what we have currently. I've thought about this a lot, and I don't have. Answers, but I have a lot of thoughts on it.

[00:08:25] We'll have a dedicated, frankly, to it in the coming months. I don't think the answers are obvious, but I wanna float it here to get the community's responses, or at least for you to consider it. Question number four. it is easy to think about our future in abstractions, climate and the environment and the economy and war and energy and AI and empire.

[00:08:52] And these all feel like far off, macro scale global crises. But eventually all futures become local. they become a town or a neighborhood or a watershed or the school where your kids go, or a hospital or the main street in your city. and a group of people who live where you do, who either know each other and can respond or do not.

[00:09:25] So my question is this, spend a few minutes imagining the town or village or city or watershed where you live today, and imagine what that might look like in 2050, less than 25 years from now. What does the best case look like? What does the worst case look like, and what does the likely middle case look like in your mind?

[00:09:51] And if you take the most likely scenario seriously and backcast from then to now, what are two or three things that you, with a few friends, family members or colleagues could begin now and plant the seeds to slightly more chance that we end in the better end of the distribution of those possibilities.

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[00:10:16] I do that a lot. I, think about where I live and I imagine 2050 under these scenarios. I'm so busy with this podcast that I haven't done as much locally as I should. but I'll, plan on doing that more. I'm committing to doing that more, but I think it's a good question. Last question. many of you know I'm a big fan of the classic Dune series, not the movies as much as the books.

[00:10:45] and I've made entire Franks comparing the sci-fi novels to the actual reality that we live in. There's a famous line from Dune, that, I forget the exact quote, but the punchline is that fear is the mind killer. And what everyone thinks of the movies or the full quote, the underlying point is real fear narrows our perception.

[00:11:08] It collapses our aperture of awareness and makes the future, or whatever the thing is you fear. So overwhelming that action in the present moment starts to shrink and feel less available, can even bring out the worst sides of our human nature if we are not aware of it. And I'll be. Frank, when I saw what was happening last weekend in the straight of horror movies, my own first reaction was not the detached analysis you saw on Tuesday's wide boundary news.

[00:11:39] It was kind of emotional. I've gamed out versions of these scenarios in my mind for a long time, and seeing one move closer, in that scenario brought up some fear. Though my partner complimented me because I didn't rush to the supermarket and put in some big Amazon order. but I think many of us are carrying some version of that fear now, consciously or subconsciously, and whether we name it fear or not.

[00:12:10] So question, what fears about the future are quietly limiting your ability to act today? And which of those fears. Are actually helping you prepare versus merely making you smaller, more frozen, and more reactive. So, those are five

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more uncomfortable questions for unsettled times. And as usual, I do not have clean answers to any of these.

[00:12:40] They're among the things that I think about. And we have a lot of content here. one could argue too much, but I'm really trying to expand this conversation. I don't offer these questions as rhetoric, but because I believe that questions like these can clarify what we value, what we depend on and what and who we may need to become.

[00:13:06] In the not too distant future. And I do think in periods like this, better questions are as or more important as more information because they are a form of preparedness in unsettled times. The future may be shaped not only by what happens out there, but by what we are prepared to notice and ask.

[00:13:34] Question and do from where we are today while the spice is still mostly fully flowing. Hope you're all well. I will talk to you soon.