

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Sam Harris:** Most people would think of meditation at this point as a remedy to dampen down this feeling of fear and anxiety. That's not actual mindfulness. You're still at war with your experience. So mindfulness requires that you become willing to simply feel the raw feeling of anxiety in this case, and to simply notice the thought arise and pass away, and perhaps to have a few experiences where that cramp is relieved to one or another degree, which indicates to you that it's actually possible to be much happier and more at ease in your own skin than you tend to be.

[00:00:38] **Nate Hagens:** Today I am joined by neuroscientists and philosopher Sam Harris for an introduction into the powerful tools of mindfulness and meditation and how these practices could foster more grounded, stable, and open-minded humans as we approach The Great Simplification. Sam is the author of Five New York Times Bestsellers as well as.

[00:01:02] The host of a Top 10 podcast making sense, he explores some of the most important questions about the human mind, society, and current events. Sam has practiced meditation for more than 30 years, including studying under Tibetan Indian, Burmese, and Western teachers. This all led him to create the popular app Waking Up, which I am a subscriber to, which teaches the theory of mindfulness and includes the best of ancient wisdom while also being pressure tested by modern science.

[00:01:37] Waking up strives to alleviate human suffering, but generally focuses on how a growing understanding of ourselves and the world might change our sense of the ways we should live. As someone who's new to these ideas of meditation awareness and non-duality, I asked all the questions I was curious about.

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[00:01:57] In this episode, we cover some of the basics of what it actually feels like to be in these states and how engaging in these practices might help us navigate difficult moments of all shapes and sizes throughout our lives. Most importantly, Sam and I dig into the possibilities of how more people attempting even the basics of awareness and mindfulness might have ripple effects in their broader communities and even in our larger human system.

[00:02:29] Before we begin, if you are enjoying The Great Simplification Podcast, I invite you to subscribe to our substack newsletter where you can read more of the system science underpinning the human predicament. You can find the link to subscribe in the show description. With that, please welcome Sam Harris.

[00:02:48] Sam Harris, welcome to the program.

[00:02:51] **Sam Harris:** Thank you. Great to meet you, Nate.

[00:02:53] **Nate Hagens:** Great to meet you too. I have your books on various bookshelves, throughout the house over, over the years. you have spent. Literally decades publicly exploring consciousness and awareness, both through your neuroscience background and personal contemplative practice, ultimately creating the Waking Up app to make these insights more widely accessible.

[00:03:20] This topic is very interesting to me, increasingly, central to how I'm viewing the future because I believe having grounded humans who are able to see the big picture, both will be key for navigating a future with lower material throughput and high levels of distrust and polarization and all the things.

[00:03:40] So before getting into the details of mindfulness and awareness and such, I wanna understand why an average individual would be interested in practicing these things at all. And maybe we start, if you could tell us why you got

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involved with these topics and maybe how your life has changed since starting to practice these ways of living your life.

[00:04:02] **Sam Harris:** Well, I think there are really two roots into this. I mean, one is just suffering, you know, just noticing your own capacity for suffering and often suffering quite needlessly, right? I mean, suffering in context where you have every reason to be happy or you think you should be happy or your happiness is clearly, available to others.

[00:04:25] for whatever reason you are, you're cursed to have the, baseline, level of unhappiness that you might have and. Just wonder about the mechanics, all of all that, and just to feel the cramp of all of that moment to moment and perhaps to have a few experiences where that cramp is relieved to one or another degree, which indicates to you that it's actually possible to be much happier and, more at ease in your own skin than you tend to be.

[00:04:54] Right. So that's, the first door, I think that's the most common one. it's really on that basis that, that certainly Buddhism is framed in those terms. The Buddha framed everything he taught in terms of suffering in the end of suffering. Right. And, but I also think that there's another door in which is just intellectual curiosity, right?

[00:05:16] Just wanting to understand your mind from the first person side, you know, from the side of your own experience directly. and seeing that introspection in some form is. At minimum a necessary component of, that effort to understand the mind. And it's purely understanding it in third person terms, in neuroscientific or psychological terms as though it could be understood from the outside entirely.

[00:05:47] that has, certainly in recent decades has begun to break down as a, As in, you know, intellectual, empirical, scientific enterprise. I mean, it's more and

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more people understand that, all we're ever doing in psychological science or cognitive science or neuroscience, is in the best case correlating states of the brain.

[00:06:12] and, intersubjective observations, with first person accounts of what it's like to be us. You can never really get off the gold standard of first person report, right? So it matters from the first person side what it's like to be depressed or what it's like to be ecstatic. and the only clue to have those states exist really are, the first person accounts of conscious beings who complain about the one or celebrate the other.

[00:06:37] So, yeah, so I, you know, really from both sides, I became interested in the nature of, the human mind and the nature of consciousness and the further reaches of human wellbeing, and we might call those spiritual or contemplative. and so yeah, I started to explore, those things both from the scientific side, but also from the, side of, meditation and, psychedelics.

[00:07:07] And, I mean, this is now going back many years into my late teens and early twenties when this, started.

[00:07:12] **Nate Hagens:** And do you remember 10, 20, 30 years ago and how you live your life today versus then, and your routines and mental, state.

[00:07:23] **Sam Harris:** Yeah. Yeah. No, I, have a pretty clear sense of who I was and, who I am now and how I got there.

[00:07:30] Yeah, I mean, it's, there's a, it's definitely a, an evolution. but on some of the most important points, there's just. Becoming more, becoming with the thing that was realized some decades ago about the nature of awareness.

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[00:07:45] **Nate Hagens:** So is it not so much striving towards something and building, but it's taking away of the veil and things that were there that were blocking that, that space?

[00:07:56] **Sam Harris:** Yeah. I mean, if we're gonna talk about the most fundamental insight that is available through mindfulness or meditation practice generally it is, it's not something you are creating or cultivating or producing. You're really, you're, recognizing something that's intrinsic to the nature of consciousness that is being overlooked actively in each moment of being distracted by thought.

[00:08:17] So whatever practice of meditation you're doing, distraction is it's antithesis. And the question is, what, are you aware of when you're not distracted? You know, what are you actually paying attention to? And there the different techniques of meditation differ to some. Significant degree, but I think the most interesting ones, the deepest ones, the ones that are the real wisdom practices, are noticing the same thing.

[00:08:42] And it is an intrinsic quality of consciousness that is, it's openness, it's sinlessness, it's selflessness ultimately. And that's the kind of the prior condition of what we're taking ourselves to be in each moment. and so it's, when you're talking about the, the possibility of self-transcendence or insight into the elusiveness of the self, it's, really that, that, that's another name for a, an insight into the way consciousness or, awareness.

[00:09:12] I, tend to use those terms as synonyms. Is prior to, you know, clinging to thought and to, to an identification, with the, there being a, kind of thinker of, thought in each moment, or a subject to experience.

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[00:09:28] **Nate Hagens:** So, a central phrase that, I often hear when discussing awareness, and you mentioned it, already, is the relief from psychological suffering.

[00:09:40] what exactly is that and how do most people today experience that? And do you think because of technology and AI and all the things that the average human today has more psychological suffering than a thousand, 10,000 years ago? Or what's that all about?

[00:09:57] **Sam Harris:** Well, most of our suffering is clearly the result of thought, right?

[00:10:02] And, what we're paying attention to each moment. And what, we're paying attention to tends not to be our immediate experience in our sensory world. Right. It's not, the thing you're seeing or hearing or smelling or tasting or touching mostly in each moment. there's some of that, but even when you are directly aware of your sensory experience, it tends to be through this scrim of discursive thought.

[00:10:28] You're judging it, you're comparing it, you're trying to improve it. You're regretting it. You're, I mean, there's this. You're talking to yourself about yourself and about your experience moment to moment. And this activity, this mental activity is so incessant that most people don't even know that it's going on.

[00:10:44] I mean, they're just, they, just, they take their, this automaticity of thinking to be just the, the, baseline state of being a mind in a world, right? That there's just no alternative but to be thinking every moment of the day. and grasping every aspect of experience conceptually, and naming, everything and judging everything and reacting, to what is pleasant or unpleasant.

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[00:11:15] and trying to get, you know, more of the, former and less of the latter. and just, and that becomes the struggle. I mean, that is the, Kinda the ground truth of our being in the world, just to be continually trying to improve experience and or, maintain experience that seems good enough for the, time being, right.

[00:11:41] Just shore it up against entropy moment to moment. And, most of our thought about our lives and ourselves is about the past and the future, right? it's not in the present. There tends to be not that much to really chew over mentally. It's, really just this, that what's gonna happen next?

[00:12:03] What's gonna happen tomorrow or the next week, next month? What happened a week ago That is, that I'm still unhappy about, or disappointed in or trying to, re you know, react to, or, you know, what, fires have to be put out. it's, you know, reputationally or in some other way and. We're thinking about ourselves, we're thinking about the, even, the what purports to be the present, but really is just kind of the recent past and the, near future, or as we can conceive of them.

[00:12:34] And this takes a tremendous amount of effort and. For most of us, I mean, there's some outliers here. Some people tend to think very happy thoughts, and they're basically satisfied with their lives, and they're just, they're filled with gratitude moment to moment. And they love the people around them, and they're just, if you could experience sample from their mindstream, you know, every hour on the hour, you would find a, you know, a very high level of baseline happiness.

[00:13:03] and that's still not enlightenment, but that's still, you know, that's, better than many of the alternatives because many, you know, certainly most of the alternatives for most of us, most of the time, is far less satisfied than that. Right? There's just this kind of mediocrity to experience and frustration and disappointment, and regret and struggle.

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[00:13:23] And then there, all of that gets punctuated by these, kind of peak experiences that are very positive that we want to get back to. Right? The more they come and then they go, and then we're left trying to rearrange our lives, such as, to have that experience more and more to get on vacation, you know, more and more to better places or for longer amounts of time, to get into, to, to fix the wrinkles in our relationship.

[00:13:48] To get back into the, you know, to get into a new relationship, to change jobs or whatever it is. to spend less time on social media to be, to behave differently on social media. it's all, it's a perpetual effort to try to be happy. And what meditation promises is a recognition, that is prior to all of that, really, that reveals a kind of tranquility and equanimity and, wellbeing that is, really, is again, intrinsic to the nature of mind and is available in each moment, whatever else you may be trying to change about your lives.

[00:14:28] I mean, this is not suggesting that the punchline is don't do anything or don't, you know, don't be ambitious. Don't change anything about yourself or your body or your health or your relationships or the world. I'm not, it's not, it doesn't lead to a kind of politicalism or a, or an apathy. but the question is, how unhappy do you have to be?

[00:14:49] As you take the steps to improve your, the world or your life within the world. and the answer to that is really not unhappy at all. If you can just recognize what awareness is, like in this moment.

[00:15:03] **Nate Hagens:** I have, something bubbling up in my awareness right now that's, that's a bit surreal. I interviewed, Robert Polsky and now when I read his books, I can't help, but hear his voice.

[00:15:17] My in my ears. Plus I've used his lectures in my class and stuff. In your case, this is the first time we've ever spoken, but I've heard your voice on the

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Waking Up app. So I'm actually talking to you and it's like this weird feedback. 'cause the only time I've heard this voice is on when I'm like doing the meditation app.

[00:15:34] Right? It's a little weird. but getting to what you just said, so historically peak experiences, like in medieval times or pre agricultural revolution times, those peak experiences were correlated to status and. Job in quotes or bagging a antelope or things that correlated to survival and reproduction.

[00:16:00] But today it's, porn and gambling and, you know, social media likes and, all those things, that don't actually correlate to our long-term wellbeing.

[00:16:13] **Sam Harris:** Yeah, I, think you could, I mean, there are obviously dopaminergic experiences that people seek and are, you know, relieved of stress for a time by, but they wouldn't necessarily count those as normative or ennobling or, good, When viewed from all sides. you just named a few. I think people have peak experiences that are intrinsically positive. But they're also intrinsically unstable because they're, you know, all experiences is unstable as whatever comes, eventually goes, right? There's just the phenomenon of impermanence here.

[00:16:57] So, but an experience like just you've fallen in love, or recognizing how much you love the one you've been in love with for many years, right? I mean, you, we, you can take your, spouse for granted all day long and then, then notice, you know, how, beautiful he or she looks and, how grateful you are to be in this moment in the sun with them.

[00:17:22] You know, both of you're relatively healthy and happy and nothing terrible, and the roof hasn't caved in, right? You're not responding to some immediate emergency, and you can just enjoy each other's company, and notice that you're, enjoying it in a way that you, tend to. To, fail to do, I mean, that, you're

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not always available to really be at peace with the one you love, even though you live under the same roof, right?

[00:17:49] You're, you technically, you have something like 24 hours in every day to enjoy each other's company. or, you know, you subtract to whatever the eight or 10 hours that you, that you're away for work or, but you're having meals together, you're raising kids together and you're still kind of taking each other for granted and missing one another much of the time.

[00:18:07] But you can have a, the sudden recognition that you know, oh my God, this is, this, it's so good to be together. Right? You know, or let's say it happens on vacation, or in the extreme case that ha you guys take a drug together, right? You take MDMA and suddenly you feel. Oh my God. this is a potential, state of consciousness that we have never tapped together, right?

[00:18:29] So what, so why is that? And what's blocking this level of wellbeing? And so meditation is a response to those moments of epiphany where you recognize, okay, something's blocking me in most of my moments. And what is that? And, that what, that is thought. I mean, it's the identification with thought that just the, perpetual dreamscape of your own discursivity in the waking state, that is less than truly at ease, less than, truly in love, less than truly filled with gratitude.

[00:19:05] and. You know, meditation suddenly becomes interesting when you recognize that you're missing the depth of your life most of the time.

[00:19:14] **Nate Hagens:** So I don't wanna make this about waking up and your app, and your book and your work. I'm more interested in the general concept of awareness or consciousness.

[00:19:25] **Sam Harris:** Sure.

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[00:19:25] **Nate Hagens:** But why did you, other than intellectually, or you're, you know, you, have a podcast and all that, why do you think this is so important, for society to be able to tap into this? And do you have any, I mean, your book is over a decade old now. I don't know how long you've had your, your waking up app out there, but do you have any demographic, progress or success that you could share of what you've observed?

[00:19:54] **Sam Harris:** Well, as, as far as the importance of all this, it really is, personally speaking, it is just the. The, most important thing I've ever learned, right? Just like the, thing that is, going to get me to my deathbed without regret is, this thing that I, that we're, talking about here, just we, what is the difference between wisdom and ignorance on this front?

[00:20:18] On the front of just how to be happy in this world, how to be, a truly ethical person. How to be really, you know, actually in love with the people in your life and not just neurotic and, you know, self contracted and elsewhere with your attention. It's fundamental. It's as just an ex an answer to the, our existential concerns.

[00:20:41] This really is the best one. I, I can, I've got, and you know, and I talk about it both in my book Waking Up, but also in the app, which I now is now, It is gonna be seven and a half years old. So I, launched it after the book. I, created the app just because an app is much better than a book, as a delivery system for this kind of content.

[00:21:03] I, audio is really perfect for meditation instruction and it's certainly better than reading text, although, many people still find the book useful. But the, app is really allows for just kind of the ongoing development of a, platform, which is contains this kind of guidance. And, it's also outgrowing me.

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[00:21:26] I mean, there are many, teachers on the app, so it's, just a, it's now has, you know, probably thousands of hours of content. and.

[00:21:45] Virtually all of the sources of human suffering and conflicts and failures of cooperation in the face of the real imperative for us to cooperate. it's all a matter of people's minds being out of control on some level. People just being lost in, in thought, you know, anchored to, identities that are, fictitious, and, you know, becoming increasingly polarized politically on the basis of all that.

[00:22:17] **Nate Hagens:** It's a big shift in my thinking in the last 18 months or so, like just to use your, work and mine as an example. Would I rather have a cadre of human beings that are. Fully versed in the thousand hours of content on waking up that knew nothing about climate debt, resource depletion, biodiversity laws, planetary boundaries, peak oil and all the things, or would I rather have truly systems literate, generalists that understood all the biophysical and ecological backdrops of our more than human predicament.

[00:22:54] And I think the answer is the former. I, think the real answer is both, which is one reason I, invited you on the, program, but I actually think to quiet the mind and come from that place of equanimity and instead of psychosis and anger and blame and polarization, is, a primary foundational first step.

[00:23:16] **Sam Harris:** Yeah.

[00:23:20] Before you know anything about this. And I, and again, I think for someone who's truly a novice to this topic, we have not yet said enough so as to clarify it. But before you can observe the difference between being, you know, lost in thought and seeing thoughts simply just appear as, you know, objects in consciousness, you're just help, you're just helplessly identified with every thought that comes through your head, right?

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[00:23:51] So, and, if someone's wondering what I'm talking about here, so, you know, you might be listening to this conversation and notice that. Your ability to pay attention to it is competing with a voice in your head, very likely. Or, and a stream of images in your head. Right? So you're listening to me and you might be thinking things like, well, well, what's he talking about?

[00:24:12] Or is this Buddhism? Or what is this? Is he gonna talk about yoga? Or, doesn't, isn't there some? Where does science kind, so, so there's a voice in your head that's sort of narrating your reaction to the, to what, to the conversation you're hearing, and leading you down different tangents. And this is a, voice in your head that can be very obvious to you when you're, reading, for instance, because you might read a book and get to the bottom of the page and realize you have no idea what you read on that page because you were, you're busy talking to yourself.

[00:24:41] You were thinking about other things. You were thinking about, oh, that, that thing you had to do in a couple hours and are, you even gonna be able to finish this chapter? And, all the while your eyes are scanning the page, but you're talking to yourself and you're not absorbing any, anything, you know, semantically, we go through our lives that way.

[00:24:59] That sense of there being a thinker of, thoughts that, that, you are, simply the one authoring this next thought, this feeling that, that of I, which is, Which is not what, which is not the name you give to your body. I mean, most people don't feel identical to their bodies. They feel like they have bodies, they feel like they're subjects, interior to the body, you know, very likely in the head.

[00:25:24] And they have a relationship to their body. I mean, they have a relationship to the world, which is obviously not what they are, but in some sense, their body is yet another object in the world that they're a passenger in. And if you have a pain in your knee, well, you're kind of up in your head as the subject,

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noticing the pain in your knee and feeling at odds with it and waiting for it to go away and now worrying about it.

[00:25:44] And maybe you should see a doctor. And yet most people feel that they're the, if they're gonna drill down on what they are as a self, they're not coterminous with their, physical body. They feel, in some sense, that they're in a Condition of dualism where they're a self in the head, a subject in the head that's aware of experience, right?

[00:26:07] It's not identical to experience, it's busy having experience. It's on the edge of experience or in the center of experience. And that is the primary illusion that gets deconstructed in meditation. And it is the thing that is a kind of knot that is tied in the center of experience that really is kind of limiting your sense of, wellbeing in the world.

[00:26:29] **Nate Hagens:** So, I'm gonna get back to something you said about, non-duality. But first I have a comment and then, a question. This is all very real to me. Last night I was reading, rereading one of my favorite fiction books, and I read an entire page and I, at the bottom of the page, I was like, what the hell did I, didn't understand a single word.

[00:26:50] Mm-hmm. Because my mind was elsewhere. So on this topic, I am quite a novice. and what you're describing is exactly how I go through. 'cause I have tons of thoughts and emails, and my current day to day is whack-a-Mole, on all the things in the world. So let me ask you this. Does that voice in your mind, Sam, still exist?

[00:27:16] Or how, has that changed in the last 10 or 20 years?

[00:27:19] **Sam Harris:** Yeah, it does. And, to be clear that this. Approach to meditation is not about getting rid of thought, right? There are some techniques

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of meditation where the explicit goal is to quiet the mind, such that thoughts are no longer arising for the period of meditation, and that becomes a, those, are what are called concentration practices, and that's a kind of.

[00:27:42] You know, contemplative athletics, right? You can get better and better at concentration and, you need a modicum of concentration to practice any style of meditation, but ultimately mindfulness or the kind of non-dual awareness practice I'm recommending here, it's not a matter of getting rid of thoughts, it's a matter of recognizing thoughts as they arise.

[00:28:03] 'cause you, ultimately can't get rid of thoughts and nor would you want to. I mean, thought is so useful to us. It's so, central to what makes us human. Virtually everything, you know, complex that we are capable of as a matter of first being able to think about that thing and, plan for that thing and communicate about it, et cetera.

[00:28:22] So it's not about getting rid of thoughts, but it's about recognizing thought and re and about recognizing what the mind is like prior to thought as just the condition in which thought arises. And that's the experiential change.

[00:28:36] **Nate Hagens:** And it's not only recognizing that thought, but. Not chasing the thought down to another one minute story about that thought.

[00:28:44] **Sam Harris:** Right? So, so let's just say you, something's happened in your life, or, in your mind, you just thought about something and suddenly you're angry right? Now, I, view even classically negative emotions like anger or fear or anxiety or impatience, or, you know, shame or regret, as salience signals, right?

[00:29:06] So it's not that we would want to be without them, although, you know, some spiritual paths. Imagine a time where you actually can get beyond them so that you never feel those things ever again. But, you know, leaving that goal aside.

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in the meantime, their salience cues, right? They're giving you information about the world or your place in the world, or they be giving false information.

[00:29:27] But any case. they're a kind of an alarm that goes off that, that demands that you pay closer attention to what's happening. And, then the question is, how long do you want to stay in that state so as to respond to this thing that is, that may or may not be happening, right? So, how useful is anger?

[00:29:49] You know, how useful is contempt or, you know, whatever state of mind you pick from the menu of, awful things. The answer, you know, 999 times out of a thousand is not very useful, right? I mean, it's, you want to release it in this next moment so that you can simply be in a more balanced frame of mind and then just decide what, how, you should respond to this, change in your environment or in your life.

[00:30:18] And meditation, mindfulness, just being, just any kind of basic awareness practice. Allows you to do that.

[00:30:28] **Nate Hagens:** So you mentioned, non-duality, before, which is a word I increasingly hear and I just still don't understand it. So my understanding is there's generally two major camps when it comes to awareness practice, dual and non-dual, and that's about all I understand.

[00:30:47] What is the distinction between these ways of being and how might a person who practices each move through or experience the world?

[00:30:56] **Sam Harris:** Well, so virtually everyone starts off with what's called dualistic practice, right? This, so I may, in my, lexicon, I tend to just talk about dualistic and non-dualistic mindfulness.

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[00:31:11] I mean, this is, there are other words for these kind of phase transitions in the literature and in Buddhism and elsewhere. But, I think this is sort of useful and, kinda a good secular framing. so dualistic practice is, where everyone starts because everyone feels, you know, virtually everyone feels like a self, right?

[00:31:33] They feel like there's a subject in the middle of experience, and they are that right. you feel like you are aware of seeing and hearing and smelling and ta tasting and touching and thinking and feeling, right? So you have the, you have your five senses and you have appearances in the mind, you know, thoughts and emotions.

[00:31:55] moods, kind of a background state of, that is cognitively and emotionally coloring with the, you know, everything else you can notice. You know, if you're feeling depressed or you're feeling sad or you're feeling excited or et cetera. but there's just not that many things to be aware of.

[00:32:11] There's just mental objects and then the five senses, and then. Other, senses that we don't tend to class as senses, like, you know, things like proprioception and et cetera, right? So there's just, there's a, there's this, state of energy of the mind and body that we can be aware of. And yet there feels to, for most people, it feels like there's this unchanging subject.

[00:32:36] On the edge of all this, or in the middle of all this. Right? That, and that is what we call I, that is the sense of self. The, it's the sense of this kind of the center of narrative gravity that moves through from one moment to the next. And it does feel stable for most people. It feels like it's, it's, the thread upon which all of our states of consciousness are strung.

[00:32:58] Right. And it's, the thing to which every experience refers, right? and when you are angry, it, you know, and you ask yourself, well, who's angry? Well,

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it's me. It's me in the center here. It's not, my hands, it's not my knees, it's not my shoulders. It's not even my face. But there's something behind my face.

[00:33:17] There's a, me here who wants to be gratified and doesn't wanna be frustrated and gets annoyed and isn't impatient and, has preferences and is. It's the place from which I can decide seemingly of my own free will to do something. I can decide to move my left hand or move my right hand, or, I can direct my attention to any object arbitrarily.

[00:33:44] So I, I can see my visual field as a totality, but then I can focus attention within the visual field. You know, now at the laptop on my desk, I can be focusing on, you know, one key on the keyboard and I can notice things in the periphery that are less clear. But the key is really in focus. 'cause that's where my foveal vision is, aimed, and I'm the one doing this, right?

[00:34:08] And then I can then, if you tell me to meditate. So then, so this is the kind of, this is the starting point for any practice of meditation you tell someone, okay, well now meditation is something you might be interested in here. We're gonna examine the self you, you claim to have. And, we're gonna see what you just, what.

[00:34:24] How it seems once you start paying focused attention, so close your eyes and, become aware of the breath say, right? And so it is from this place of feeling like a self that someone's going to begin to pay attention to the feeling of breathing. And then they're gonna notice that when they're distracted by thought and they're gonna come back to the breath, and then that's the place from which they begin this practice where of mindfulness, where they're paying attention to the breath as a starting object of concentration.

[00:34:53] But then they can, then it opens up and they hear sounds and they can pay attention to other sensations. And ultimately it's even to thoughts themselves.

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They can, they might notice, oh yeah, there's a, just an image arising or a, sound of, it's kinda the voice of my own mind arising. But again, ev in every moment it feels like there's a place from which.

[00:35:15] All of that's being noticed. There's a center to experience and that is the, me. That's the subject. That's the, now, the meditator. Right? There's the thinker of thoughts. It's the, intender of intentions. and now it's the meditator who's now struggling to pay attention in the midst of this, tumult of thought.

[00:35:41] Now I'm trying to get concentrated. Now, thought is kind of an adversary, right? Because it keeps arising and distracting me. Taking away, taking me away from the project. You know, I thought I was meditating, but now I wake up, I've been thinking about, this project I'm working on for the last three minutes.

[00:35:56] I completely forgot I was supposed to be meditating and okay, now I'm gonna come back to the breath. and so that is, it's that, and that, it's that alternation between being distracted and then remembering to pay attention. That becomes the practice in the beginning, but still it is defined by this, the sense of subject object.

[00:36:14] Awareness that is the, that's the dualistic state, which, you know, non-duality promises to overcome. but you know, that is the starting point for everybody.

[00:36:24] **Nate Hagens:** You know, it's funny, at, at least five people in the last few years has have gifted me a subscription to your Waking Up app. And I remember, I think it was five years ago, a good friend of mine sent it to me, and I, listened to the first 10.

[00:36:39] They were like a minute or three minutes long, and she asked me, how's it going? I said, oh, I'm, failing. I'm not doing so well. I'm just, I'm, failing.

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And she laughed because there is no real such thing as failing now five years on. At least I understand that.

[00:36:56] **Sam Harris:** Well, so yeah, the, sense of failure is unavoidable, but it is in fact something that just needs to be overcome.

[00:37:03] I mean, so. To give people a sense of what that's like. So you're, the practice in the beginning is very simple. I mean, it's always very simple. It doesn't mean it's easy to do, but the, instructions are incredibly simple. I mean, just pay attention to the breath. And every time you notice your loss in thought, just come back to the sensation of breathing.

[00:37:21] Either the, rising and falling of the, of your chest or abdomen or the, feeling of, your breath coming in and out of your nostrils. Once you have a, even the slightest handle on that, you can begin to open up awareness to everything. So there's nothing inexperienced that can't be incorporated into the field of meditation.

[00:37:41] So there's no, you don't have to be in a quiet environment because sounds are just as good as objects of meditation as the breath and also sensations in your body and, anything you can notice. Ultimately, even thoughts themselves can be objects of, awareness.

[00:37:59] **Nate Hagens:** My thoughts distracted me yet down a different rabbit hole.

[00:38:03] And what came to mind right now is I'm just curious if this is a uniquely human thing or if other animals are. Constantly fully aware and don't get distracted by thoughts the way that we do.

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[00:38:15] **Sam Harris:** Well, I don't think they have linguistic thoughts the way we do. I think they have thoughts, they have drives, they have expectations.

[00:38:23] They have. I mean, I, think it's depends how far down the phylo phylogenetic tree you want to go. But, you know, if you're talking about, you know, other mammals, you know, like dogs, right? You know, like, like clearly they have complex states of mind. You know, they, understand a lot about the world.

[00:38:40] They understand a lot about us, right? they're very sensitive to changes in our behavior and even our states of attention, right? So. There's a lot going on in a dog's mind, and I would imagine much of that is conscious. but it's almost certainly not linguistic in any sense that we would recognize.

[00:38:59] Right? But that doesn't mean they don't have expectations or, you know, internal models of the world and future states of the world. If you know, grab a leash and your dog, gets excited, it's presumably getting excited because it has some forward looking model of what the, you know, you are holding a leash portends, which is almost certainly, you, guys are gonna be going outta the house immediately and, into the world, and that's a very novel experience for your dog.

[00:39:27] But as far as the, just the. The Torrance of Discursivity and, image formation and, the degree to which we have habituated to all of that and are perpetually having conversations in our minds with people who aren't there and reacting as though they were there. Right. I'd be like, you're having a, an argument with somebody who may even be dead.

[00:39:54] Right. But your. Mental state and your physiology is being modified by this, conversa, this imagined conversation. This is all very much like being asleep and dreaming and not knowing that you're dreaming, right? I mean, we do this everyone, you know, whether you remember it or not, virtually everyone falls asleep at night and spend some considerable period hallucinating relationships

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and various entanglements in the world and, doing so little reality testing that they don't even notice, how strange all this is, right?

[00:40:27] Like you were, the last, thing you should have remembered was you were in your bed safely, under the covers, getting ready to sleep, and now all of a sudden you're at a conference where you've forgot, you know, your laptop isn't working and the audience is waiting for you to deliver your talk. And you, can't get your notes up.

[00:40:44] And now you're having this sort of mortifying experience of, public embarrassment, and you're panicking and, you're so. Unaware of your real circumstance, which is that you're safely in your bed asleep, that you don't, you haven't even done enough reality testing to notice that it is in fact, strange and impossible.

[00:41:06] Even that you immediately transition from your bed into a conference hall, where you're now given a talk that you've never had any memory of ever having to prepare. And so you're identified with this circumstance that is a total hallucination, right? And you're in, you are in fact psychotic. I mean, in the state of dreaming.

[00:41:24] You, everyone is basically a psychotic unless they're having a lucid dream. but there's a version of that's happening more or less every waking moment when you're lost in thought and unaware of that

[00:41:34] **Nate Hagens:** for most of humanity.

[00:41:36] **Sam Harris:** Yeah. These are kind of micro dreams that are basically a, you know, kind of psychosis light.

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[00:41:43] Experience and the, real boundary condition between psychosis and our normal, you know, waking distraction is that the normals like ourselves have the good sense not to open our mouths and talk out loud in front of other people, at least most of the time. And occasionally you'll find yourself even talking to yourself out loud, and you'll be properly psychotic, hopefully in the privacy of your, room.

[00:42:08] But. It's the person who's walking down the sidewalk, talking out loud to people who aren't there that we recognize, okay, that guy's got a problem. But we all have a very similar problem most of the time. And meditation is really the only technique of radically that allows you to radically break that spell.

[00:42:27] **Nate Hagens:** So in real time listening to you, Sam, I also have thoughts that are emerging, and then I have to get back to paying attention to you. That's

[00:42:37] **Sam Harris:** normal too, right? Well, I'm long-winded. I'm long-winded. So I give people ample opportunity to get lost

[00:42:41] **Nate Hagens:** some thoughts, but I'll share this. Well, first of all, do you have a dog?

[00:42:44] Just outta curiosity?

[00:42:45] **Sam Harris:** I've, no, I've had, dogs. I've had many dogs. But now, I'm a cat person. I,

[00:42:50] **Nate Hagens:** okay. I have dogs and cats. And I have to say that, I didn't realize this until you were talking and I thought about it. My animals. Are sometimes a vector for me to not officially meditate, but to get into the state that you were describing of the non-duality, because I'll look in their eyes or I'll just observe them.

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[00:43:15] And the reason it's salient is you texted me, earlier and said you would be 10 minutes late. Rather than check emails and stuff, I went and sat by, it's snowing here, and I sat and watched the squirrels in my bird feeder for five minutes and I just sat and looked at them. And for me, I don't think of, oh yeah, I got my meditation in for the day.

[00:43:36] I don't even consider that as meditation, but I actually think it is because of, well, I don't know. What do you think about that? It, quiets all the thoughts down and I'm just kinda lost in observing their behavior and reflecting.

[00:43:50] **Sam Harris:** I mean, there's two, two answers to this question. I mean, from the side of one who knows how to meditate, everything is potentially meditation.

[00:43:59] I mean, there really is no boundary between meditation and the rest of life. So if you are gonna ask me to look at the squirrels eating from your bird feeder, or do anything else that, that, that use of attention is totally compatible with what I'm calling meditation. So I can, be meditating while looking at the squirrels.

[00:44:17] I can be meditating while, even checking my email. Right. Although there, you know, obviously some circumstances are more conducive to it than others.

[00:44:25] **Nate Hagens:** You, couldn't be meditating by having this conversation.

[00:44:28] **Sam Harris:** Oh yeah. No, of course I could. Yeah. I mean, there's no, barrier to recognizing what consciousness is like and noticing that there's no, I mean, then, so now we'll start talking about the kind, the non-dual side of this.

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[00:44:41] Noticing that there's no center to it. Noticing that you're not on the edge of it, noticing that there's just this open field of experience and you're identical to that. there's no, there's never any real barrier to that, to that recognition and to, to to, to quote, meditate. Is really ultimately not a practice you're adding to your life.

[00:45:03] I mean, once you really know how to do it, it's, you're doing less of something rather than more of something. It's, a recognition of any experience from a place of not being distracted. Almost nothing other than explicit instruction in meditation is liable to get you there. So, so a lot of people, you'll hear people say, well, I don't meditate, but, my, meditation is jogging.

[00:45:28] Or playing the guitar or, you know, playing with, my pets or surfing a way. So lots of things they like to do that make them feel good. The way I think about that is if you know how to meditate well then all of those things are compatible with meditation. If you actually, if you don't know how to meditate, you're unlikely to, discover how to do it.

[00:45:48] By virtue of playing with your dogs or surfing or having sex or anything else you like to do

[00:45:53] **Nate Hagens:** in shorthand, is meditation or awareness? the opposite of just purely the opposite of being distracted?

[00:46:01] **Sam Harris:** It is, except there are. Different versions of not being distracted, right? So like, so what you're paying attention to when you're not distracted is the measure of what your meditation practice or any other, you know, attentional focus is, right?

[00:46:18] So, as I said earlier, there, there are practices, there are meditative meditation practices that are pure concentration practices where you're trying to

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become, so one pointed on an object, whether it's a breath, you know, the breath, or you're a visualization or a mantra. Or you could, it could be any arbitrary object.

[00:46:36] You could stare at a candle flame or just a colored disc or, anything. you're trying to become so, so one pointed on that, that you, notice nothing else and you, and at a certain level of concentration thoughts actually cease to arise. It's a kind of a, a. A spiritual attainment, right? I mean, the people become, you know, spiritual athletes of a sort when they train in these disciplines.

[00:47:04] And, meditation there can be very, drug-like, right? Because concentration is intrinsically pleasant and mu much of the pleasure we get in peak experiences in life, in, you know, like athletic experiences or sex or, encounters with nature or, any, anything that goes by the name of a, you know, peak experience tends to have this feature of intense concentration in the moment where you're no longer thinking about the past or, anticipating in the future.

[00:47:38] You're just fully committed to a direct sensory engagement with whatever's happening. And then people tend to mistake the significance of the, of what's happening. As opposed to recognizing that really it's the quality of attention that was so important. Right. and meditation's the only game in town where you really, you recognize that, that attention is the real currency of profundity and flow and, the peak, the peakiness of any peak experience.

[00:48:11] It's not the, it's not the contents of consciousness, it's how fully you're paying attention to the contents of consciousness.

[00:48:17] **Nate Hagens:** And presumably, the lack of attention or the increase in our destructiveness, one could speculate that as a percentage of the alive at one time human population, and it is a percentage of the average waking life of a

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human, we've probably never been as distracted as now 'cause of our technology and social structures, et cetera.

[00:48:44] Is, that a fair statement?

[00:48:45] **Sam Harris:** I would say generally speaking technology, the way most of us are using, especially our smartphone technology coupled to social media, we are, you know, using these information tools to fragment our lives in ways that are truly novel and tending in the direction you suspect, which is, it's becoming harder to sustain attention on anything even classically rewarding things for what used to be, what used to be considered normal amount of time.

[00:49:22] So it's getting harder to sit down and read to and read a book, even if it's a book you really wanna read.

[00:49:28] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Reading's gonna be the new gym.

[00:49:30] **Sam Harris:** Yeah, no, it's like just a, I mean, you know, but even your audience, I would expect there's, it's a, you know, more than the usual percentage of, committed readers, but.

[00:49:41] I would, imagine that many people in your audience have, are still finding it much harder to sit down and read a book for an hour than they did 10 years ago or 20 years ago. And, even watching a movie, right? I mean, talk about something that really was always effortless, right? Just sit down and watch a good movie for two hours, right?

[00:49:59] You wanna watch this movie. It's, you got, you've got the television you want, you've got the couch you want, you've set aside, you set, aside the time to watch it. Still many people are picking up their smartphones in the middle of that

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experience because they're, seeking this dopaminergic, interruption in the, from the very experience.

[00:50:21] They, it is just like a classically pleasurable, you know, low effort experience that they would otherwise find effortless. They're finding it hard to resist interrupting themselves. Having that experience

[00:50:32] **Nate Hagens:** and what you just said is absolutely true now. AI and what's coming is gonna make that, crack cocaine and steroids.

[00:50:44] I fear.

[00:50:45] **Sam Harris:** Oh yeah. Well, when you look at what leaving AI aside, I mean, AI is just gonna weaponize and, exacerbate everything we're talking about, but, just look at just engagement with short form video like TikTok or shorts on, YouTube. That cadence of, attentional reward, right? I mean, these just kind of micro treadmills we get on and off and on and off and on and off and our, intolerance of something going.

[00:51:22] For too long, right? Like we want, there are many pe there are people for whom even a 15 minute video, that's just too much of a commitment, right? Like, no, that 15 minutes is not the thing you want to, you people want the 32nd version. If you could, if you can boil it down to 15 minutes, you know, I want the 32nd version that, that has these jump cuts where all the fat is, has been taken off of the, off of the, you know, the sugar and, that, so we're training ourselves to have this, this, utterly piecemeal engagement with, a, continually shifting information landscape where we are attention just alights from, you know, one object to the next and barely settles there.

[00:52:16] and the, just that the search for novelty never ends. We just, we never sink into anything for long enough to notice that there's, depth or variation and it

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has its own dynamics of reward. and I mean, boredom. Boredom has been genuinely canceled. I mean, it used to be that. The human mind had to confront boredom, right?

[00:52:44] You're sitting in the waiting room of a, you know, the doctor's office and you've got 45 minutes to wait and the your doctor has whatever crappy magazines he has. but this is, and now obviously I'm talking about the days before the smartphone, you just had a dumb phone that could do nothing but, but make phone calls.

[00:53:03] And you were condemned to sit in on that couch, for a good long while alone with your thoughts. and then you, felt the pain of not being able to sink your attention into something that that is satisfying. And, What boredom is. I mean, you recognize this certainly when you go on a silent meditation retreat.

[00:53:27] Boredom is nothing other than just lack of attention. It's this, state of mind where your attention is searching for an object that is satisfying enough, and all you've got are your thoughts about the past and thoughts about the future and your restlessness. And nothing is salient enough to command your attention and your quote bored.

[00:53:50] But the smartphone has completely obviated that state of mind. I think now until the end of the world, you can always see this next thing that is lured enough or. interesting enough or frightening enough that it's never true of you to say that you're now bored.

[00:54:08] **Nate Hagens:** A large part of the distribution, the probability distribution of the future does have a long period between the end of the smartphone and the end of the world, in my opinion.

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[00:54:19] but let, me ask you this. If someone is able to consistently practice and live in these states of awareness in their day-to-day lives, what have you observed on how that changes that person's relationship with their own emotions?

[00:54:35] **Sam Harris:** Well, much of your psychological suffering becomes optional. At that point, which is to say it can be, you can, get off the ride more or less at any arbitrary point when you decide, okay, it's not worth suffering over this thing now, I mean, so like you take the, here's a classic case, you know, something bad or scary happens.

[00:54:59] I mean, let's say you get some, scary diagnosis from your doctor, right? And you, know, you're not quite sure what this is, but you know, you've got something, you've got a growth on your, lung, and now everybody's worried about it. And you, have to get an MRI, but we can't get you an MRI until Tuesday, right?

[00:55:16] It's, Thursday and you gotta wait, you know, five days. You got a whole, you got a long weekend before we can get you more information about this thing. So now you're in this state of uncertainty and you have, a date, you have a date, an hour on the calendar where, you know this, you, there's nothing you can do between now and then, right?

[00:55:35] That you know when, you know what the next step is. You gotta get an MRI on Tuesday. How, what are you gonna do with your mind between now and Tuesday, right? How much time are you gonna be going to spend, in the torture chamber? You are now preparing for yourself worrying about whether you have lung cancer and whether you're gonna live to see your children grow up and et cetera, et cetera, right?

[00:55:58] So, the, truth is 99% of what you are going to think about between now and Tuesday is unnecessary. There's nothing. If, there's something that you have

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to think about, well by, by all means, think about that thing, right? Let's say you, you recognize that you don't, your estate plan isn't in order and you should, you know, it would be only rational to, have a will that is fully executed and, you know, let's do that.

[00:56:24] Okay, so now you have an appointment with your lawyer, next Friday. Alright, so that's on the calendar now. Now what do you have to think about? Right? The, truth is, 99% of what we think about is completely unnecessary and, it makes us miserable. So when you can meditate, when you can really just notice thought and release it, you can, it's not to say that the scary thought won't keep coming back, but you can keep noticing it and letting go of it, and the letting go and, really letting go of it.

[00:56:55] And the letting go of it really, is freedom. most people would think of meditation at this point as a remedy to. Dampen down this feeling of, fear and anxiety, right? So you're gonna pay attention to thought, you're gonna pay attention to anxiety and you're gonna pay attention to them in such a way so as to, make them go away, right?

[00:57:20] And it's the two things to notice about that. One is that's not actual mindfulness. I mean, to have the ulterior motive of trying to make the anxiety go away and to get rid of a certain species of thought, that's not actually, that's not that, it's certainly not non-dual mindfulness. It's not even dualistic mindfulness.

[00:57:38] That's just more fear and craving to feel differently, right? And it's just, you're still at war with your experience. So mindfulness, even beginner's level, you know, dualistic mindfulness requires that you become willing to simply feel. The raw feeling of anxiety in this case and to simply notice the thought arise and pass away, but you, but your unwillingness to feel anxiety.

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[00:58:05] This, the, resistance, the aversion to anxiety is itself something that you need to notice and release, right? you need to get into a posture of real openness and balance and non judgmentalism and just. Just a willingness to feel just as you can. You can feel it just this next moment.

[00:58:26] So be, become aware that you can fully make contact with this moment of, what you're calling anxiety and just become interested in it and, investigate and investigative, with respect to it. Just become curious to, to feel it more deeply. and it's not a way of avoiding it, it's a way of actually being willing to feel it fully in each moment.

[00:58:49] So it's not so, and so mindfulness is really a, fundamental, overcoming, overcoming of resistance in that moment. And, but if you can do that. You begin to drop into this state of being wherein you recognize, okay, all of this thought and all of this reactivity to the thought is unnecessary.

[00:59:13] I mean, you're, you basically suffer twice. You suffer whatever you're gonna suffer on Tuesday. Let's, you know, if, let's say you get bad news on Tuesday, well, you'll be there on Tuesday to react to that bad news. But between now and Tuesday, how unhappy do you have to be? The answer is you don't have to be unhappy if you can just be.

[00:59:32] Moment to moment.

[00:59:32] **Nate Hagens:** Moment. So this is at the core of why I invited you on the program. Have you ever heard of the, framing of pre tragic, and post tragic?

[00:59:42] **Sam Harris:** n no. But I, I, think I'm, I can intuit the gist, but no, I haven't heard that.

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[00:59:47] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. It's pret tragic is you're not aware of all the things you're just going through your life and tragic as you discover climate change and polarization and addiction and resource depletion and all the things, and you are stressed and anxious all the time.

[01:00:02] And post tragic is a little bit rhyming with non-dual, but it's, you've passed through the grief and you acknowledge and recognize it, but you can still work on it. and this kind of hearkens to what you were just saying because the diagnosis and you used the spot on your lungs, scan, Many of the listeners of this show, the diagnosis is the diagnosis of civilization and society's future.

[01:00:32] **Sam Harris:** Mm-hmm.

[01:00:33] **Nate Hagens:** And once you learn deeply about how all the things are interconnected, it's very much like the example you just said. so many of the shows listeners are aware and think a lot about the future, specifically the many conversion crisis that humanity's gonna face in the coming decade in addition to the ones we're facing right now.

[01:00:56] So how might mindfulness and awareness practices offer a different perspective or way to engage slash cope and, maybe even be more effective, on working on these issues?

[01:01:10] **Sam Harris:** Well, whatever we. Due to ensure that the future is better than the past, or at least not worse.

[01:01:18] **Nate Hagens:** I say better than the default.

[01:01:20] 'cause I don't know that it's gonna be better than the past, but keep going.

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[01:01:23] **Sam Harris:** Right? But, let's say in the best case, you know, we, solve all of our problems, all of these looming, You know, existential risks and, catastrophic risks. I mean, just let's just, we just, you know, every coordination problem that can be solved, we solve it.

[01:01:37] All the benign technologies that can be scaled, we scale them. we just, act as sanely as we could imagine acting, and leverage technology in all the ways, to allow us to do that. short of cracking the, immortality code, we all need to be post tragic with respect to our, personal fate, which is, you know, governed by impermanence, I mean, we're all gonna die, right?

[01:02:08] We're all gonna lose everything. It's, our engagement with this place is only for a time, right? Everything is rented. You know, whatever you think you have, you're eventually gonna lose it, right? and, then, and in those final days or final hours, you'll have the memory of all the time you spent acquiring it, right?

[01:02:27] I mean, we just, we acquired all these things and relationships and, all of it's going to be dissipated again. Ultimately, it's all gonna be cast on the wind. And if we have kids, we're going to have to say goodbye to those kids. And if, if you live long enough, if you're the, if you're the lucky one who's got, you know, perfect genes and perfect health, and a, you know, just, you just, you hit the, you, won the lottery with respect to your, you know, your survivability in this place, well then you are gonna be the one who hears about the death of everyone you care about.

[01:02:59] Right? The, you know, the smartphone's gonna ring or what, or the implant in your brain is gonna ring, depending on how far in the future we are. And you're just gonna hear about the last friend you had disappearing, right? So we have to, so the que so the real conundrum for us is how can we be happy and in love and, filled with gratitude in this place, right?

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[01:03:23] In the world as it is, right? Even in even the best possible version of the world, as it is, a situation where things are, fundamentally precarious, right? I mean, you just, we, know that entropy wins ultimately. And, the question is there a place of spiritual depth of, contemplative depth, of, real engagement with the mystery of our being moment to moment that is deeply satisfying and not perpetually at odds with the truth of impermanence?

[01:03:59] And I, I think that, this discovery awaits everyone, but I think there is, I think consciousness as it is in each moment is not worried about the next moment. It's not worried about the past. It's not, Filled with worry or regret or anxiety or, any other. I mean, it's just, it is the place in which any of those states will appear, but they'll appear based on your overlooking the nature of mind in this moment and getting entangled again with this sort of dream scape of thinking about the past or the future.

[01:04:37] there really is just being in the present and you can bring all of your intelligence to that project and still be available to be a, you know, a, collaborator in, any complex situation. Right. I mean, it's, not, to say you can't think about AI and existential risk and all of that, and also recognize the pure mystery of, consciousness in each moment.

[01:05:01] You, you can do both of those things, but the latter really answers to this existential concern of just, how, can we be happy knowing that everything is ultimately going over the falls? So then I think it's, also largely a story of, improving our ethics and, you know, per personally, but also at kind of the systems level so as to allow for saner incentives and more reliable, solutions to coordination problems and mean, just how is it that we can cooperate more and more effortlessly together as just as social primates at civilizational scale.

[01:05:43] And there it's much more story, it's not in my mind a story about many, more people having. Personal epiphanies that transform their lives so that they

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become more like saints. I think, I mean, that's, a good thing and we should have that happen as much as, possible. But I think what we want are systems and systems of incentives and institutions that enshrine those incentives that make it easier and easier for ordinary, neurotic people to behave.

[01:06:15] More like really good people. And so it's like you, we want to outsource our wisdom to our institutions and our norms and our politics, right? So that's like even mediocre people, and even frankly, awful people can be incentivized to behave like good people much of the time or all of the time. whereas work, we seem to be in a situation where you, often have to be a moral hero to be, to behave halfway decently given how these incentives are tuned.

[01:06:45] And that's, what's bad.

[01:06:47] **Nate Hagens:** I totally agree with you. And so let's move to the, beyond the level of the individual. one of the major things I've come to believe, especially in the last year or so, is that community and social capital are gonna be at the center of. The better responses to our upcoming and existing predicament.

[01:07:05] So how do these awareness practices shape or change our ability to create strong and resilient communities? Is there any additive force with a group of people who come from this strong base, of awareness and, how does this scale or does it scale

[01:07:23] **Sam Harris:** well? Well, it does in that it just transforms your sense of who you are in each moment in relationship to other people, right?

[01:07:33] So you're not, if you're not clinging to your sense of self as resolutely as you used to, you know, or, and as most people are, it gives you a degree of flexibility and resilience that like, like, like just, take the variable of taking things personally or not. Right. Being like, just how offend, how offendable are you?

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[01:07:58] Like how petty are you? How, how disposed are you to hold a grudge? I'm describing patterns of friction in social relationships and, things that der social relationships and make cooperation harder.

[01:08:15] **Nate Hagens:** So if you are working on these issues and you meet locally in a group of 10 people, for instance, if one person doesn't have all those grudges and thinks this way, it's not gonna make a huge difference in the discussion.

[01:08:29] But if five people do, or if 10 people do, they get to actionable solutions and real incentives and institutional change much faster and Right. That's the, that would be the idea.

[01:08:42] **Sam Harris:** Well, there's that, but even one person can, demonstrate a different way of being in a group and that can become noticeable.

[01:08:52] Right. And, even valued. Even, though other people aren't necessarily up to the up to it themselves, they might value this very quality in that person. And that person might achieve a leadership role in a group just because they're, obviously the person who isn't, who has their priorities straight, right?

[01:09:12] Who's not, in it, who's not merely being selfish and transactional? Say, who's not, whose ego isn't in the way of in this negotiation or in this, you know, the, like, you notice somebody who's, I mean, just I to come back to, a, an emotion that I named earlier that people might not have been familiar with the name I gave it.

[01:09:36] I, spoke about sympathetic joy as opposed to envy. Right? Lemme just take this one. One aspect of, experience. I mean, just everyone knows what this is like, like you have a friend, let's say something really good has happened in your life, right? Like you, just, you've, had some real breakthrough.

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[01:09:57] you just, you, you know, you got a job, a really desirable job, right? And now your, whole, financial situation has changed. Right? Now they're the friend and you, share that, intrinsically good news with all your friends, right? And you might notice that some of your friends have genuine smiles on their face and are really just happy for you.

[01:10:23] And you might notice that other friends can't quite muster that, right? Right. They're, well, they're like, they, in their own minds, they have a kind of zero sum calculus going on in the background where they feel somehow diminished by this good thing that happened to you. And put yourself on the other side of it.

[01:10:42] I mean, just because this'll be a familiar experience to, many people. I mean, just to notice something great happens with your friend. Things aren't, you know, you know, you not that much has, been going well for you, but you've got this friend who's just killing it. And you find out, you know, you see yet more evidence of their success.

[01:11:00] And you notice this sort of poverty of, attitude in yourself where, I mean, you, claim to love this person. You know, presumably you would wish all these good things upon them if you could. And yet there's this kind of miserliness in you emotionally where you are feeling envy. You're feeling like you're feeling diminished by this good thing, by the slice of the pie you saw them get.

[01:11:23] Right. That's a very, I mean, that is the antithesis of real friendship, really. I mean, that's, the absence of love, you know, I mean, what love feels like in that circumstance is you are just happy for the other person without residue. That's real love co. Yeah.

[01:11:39] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So how do you, going down that pathway, how do you think the world would change if many, most everyone actively practiced awareness and mindful technique, mindfulness techniques, and if not everyone,

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have you speculated on what percentage of people would it take for there to be a meaningful, positive effect on society?

[01:12:02] **Sam Harris:** Well, I think every little bit matters, but I, again, I do think there are two levels to solving these problems. and the most important level would be at the systems level. How do we converge with something like 8 billion strangers to solve problems that, Only a, that can only be solved at the global level, right?

[01:12:27] well then you're talking about systems. You're not, and, laws and governance and, incentives. you're not talking about what each of us can do in the privacy of our lives by redirecting our attention. So I think we just have to work on both levels. I think we, we want s saner people who are better people individually who, have their own private ethical codes more dialed in and all of that.

[01:12:53] But I think we also want sane or system level influences and, demands. And, and that's, you know, that's another way to question is. There's probably 10,000 people on earth who, if they had their head screwed on straight, could usher in a very different future for us. I mean, it's not, there's not that many decision makers, right?

[01:13:15] So it's, not that everyone has to become wise or even slightly wiser for there to be a sea change in, human governance and, aspiration. I mean, it really is. It's, I mean, 10,000 people might even be an exaggeration.

[01:13:32] **Nate Hagens:** No, it is an exaggeration. But the challenge is, we have to have the average person somewhat.

[01:13:39] Change how they perceive these things to get those other people elected, and into positions of power. So there's that. Yeah. So, so other than the

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mention of the dogs and cats and squirrels, this conversation has been centered on the idea of human consciousness, but there's a lot of deep ecologists and people, that deeply care about the 10 million species.

[01:14:02] We share this, planet with our nieces, nephews, and cousins in nature. And I'm wondering what your beliefs are about the consciousness of the rest of the living world. And if you agree with me that other living things have consciousness, how do you think we should change the way that we interact with them and, behave within the world more broadly?

[01:14:23] **Sam Harris:** Well, I do think there's, no reason to withhold consciousness to just. Humans obviously, or just primates or even just the mammals we tend to care about because they're, you know, charismatic, and withhold it from, you know, other things that we care less about because, you know, they're not cute.

[01:14:48] so how far down to push it is still an open question. I mean, there are many people who think consciousness might go all the way down or at least far enough down so that we're not even talking about animals anymore. We could be talking about single cells or, you know, just very, you know, basic systems.

[01:15:05] But, you know, I would attribute consciousness to more or less every animal we tend to think about and interact in, you know, some level of consciousness. and therefore these, animals have, they, they almost certainly experience pain and, you know, some kind of pleasure. Right? And if, but I, do think our, we have some serviceable intuitions here with, around there being a hierarchy of suffering and wellbeing that were right to be, motivated by.

[01:15:44] So, I mean, this is something I think of in terms of like the windshield test, right? You're driving home and a bug hits your windshield, right? And, that's something that you might notice and feel almost nothing about. And, you're

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certainly not gonna, it's not, the first thing you're gonna tell your wife when you won, walk through the front door.

[01:16:09] You won't believe what happened today. I was driving home and some bug, I don't know what it was, maybe a moth, maybe a fly, maybe a bee just died because I killed it because I was driving so fast and it splattered on my windshield. that's just not interesting and it's. Not really. It's not interesting for a reason.

[01:16:28] **Nate Hagens:** Well, if we lived our lives that way, we would be so slow in our daily activities, we would do nothing.

[01:16:34] **Sam Harris:** Right. But, if you hit a squirrel, you feel a certain way, you definitely feel more, you, there's a, drama, there's kind of a life drama there that you feel implicated in. I mean, you could, there might have been another squirrel on the side of the road that, had a relationship with that squirrel, and you saw that squirrel.

[01:16:51] It's like if it, it can make you feel awful because there's a, there's an empathy you have for squirrel consciousness, which I think is. Again, to a first approximation, somewhat realistic. I mean, these are social animals. I think they have all kinds of social rewards that we're right to intuit and care about.

[01:17:10] If you run over a dog, you are very likely gonna feel terrible. And, you know, there's just a wider set of implications. I mean, one, that dog was probably loved by a person, right? So you're gonna think about the kid whose dog you just killed, right? But even that aside, you know, we, you, understand the richness of a life of a dog.

[01:17:32] and I think you're, I think we're right to think, I mean, there are some contingent facts here that are, that, that are, not. Probably defensible. I mean, I

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think probably you could say that pigs are just as smart as dogs are even smarter. Right? and yet we eat pigs and we don't eat dogs.

[01:17:48] And so Lily, you know, there, there are, things that can't,

[01:17:50] **Nate Hagens:** that's exactly the reason I stopped eating pigs 15 years ago. Just the sentence you just said.

[01:17:55] **Sam Harris:** Okay. So like, so there are people who, kind of try to align their ethics along all these, lines or not, but, so, and there's some potential, contradictions here, but generally speaking, I think we have intuitions that were right to want to defend, which is if you run over somebody's child, right?

[01:18:19] There's a reason why that's like the worst day of your life. And it's the kind of thing, it's, the one day of your life. If you could go back in time, you would change, you know, before you change anything else about your life, you'd change that day. Right? Yeah. and you don't say, you wouldn't necessarily say that about a dog, and you certainly wouldn't say it about a squirrel, and you'd ne you're not gonna say it about a moth, right?

[01:18:40] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So I want to be, respectful of your time, and I expect you're gonna have some, zingers to share on the closing questions that I ask all my guests. But before I get there, are there any misconceptions about awareness and mindfulness that you would like to highlight and clear up for listeners before I, I move to my usual closing questions?

[01:19:03] It's a big topic.

[01:19:05] **Sam Harris:** Well, I think, the basic misconception, which I've already touched upon briefly is that, meditation is something you are doing. Or adding to your life that, that it's a practice, right? Analogous to playing tennis or playing golf

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or playing piano. It's like, it's a, it's something you have to learn and you can do it or not do it.

[01:19:28] Now it's half of that's true in the beginning. It certainly seems to be a skill that you have to learn and you can be good at it or not. And there's, effort involved and all of that. All of that seems true, but once you actually learn it, none of that's true. I mean, it really is just the, it's doing less rather than more.

[01:19:49] It's you're, when you're really meditating, you're ceasing to do something, you're not doing something, you're ceasing to be distracted. You're noticing something that's already there, right. About something that's already in, in the very nature of your conscious experience of the world.

[01:20:05] **Nate Hagens:** That makes a lot of sense.

[01:20:08] so I don't know how much you know about my work and the Metris the Poly Crisis, but just taking off your neuroscience philosopher meditation expert hat, what, do you recommend people watching listening to this show can do to help address some of the things in our world? or is it all up to politicians and leaders?

[01:20:36] **Sam Harris:** This is a coordination problem that I don't know how we can all solve, but it seems to me that we all have, I mean, the change that has to happen more or less everywhere, all at once is we all have to become less and less patient with tribalism and dogmatism. So wherever you see tribalism, holding sway in our politics, and it's almost everywhere we, when, whenever you see people who are just, who are portraying their stated principles because they're just, they just want their team to win, right?

[01:21:11] Like they're reacting to the bad thing that the other guy did, but when their side does it, they don't care. You know? So the political hypocrisy we see

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everywhere, all of that has to become more and more sickening to us, right? it's just, and, you know, identity politics falls into this bin. I think, almost every mention of race in our politics, to just take one example, is.

[01:21:38] Politically toxic and counterproductive. I just don't think we, I, think we know where we want to be as a society with respect to the variable of race, which is we want to not care about it. We know we want to recognize that the color of a person's skin has exactly no moral or political significance.

[01:21:54] And we wanna just, we really just wanna cease to, to care about superficial differences between people. Right. So, continuing to care about it for the purpose of social activism, which is what identity politics is, a failure mode. Because continuing to care about race simply isn't a way of ceasing to care about it.

[01:22:14] Right. We just can't, we, and, yet, you know, if to talk about the, left side of our politics, actually both on the left and right. If you go far enough in either direction, you meet people who just insist that we must keep caring about superficial differences, between people, you know, race to, to take one example.

[01:22:30] So I think tribalism, we have to get, be beyond tribalism. We have to get beyond dogmatism too. I mean, so dogmatism is, just this failure mode of thinking when people are believing things strongly without evidence or despite very compelling counter evidence because these are dogmas that can't be reinspected.

[01:22:46] **Nate Hagens:** You said we have to have less and less patience for tribalism and dogmatism isn't being less patient like lead us to tribalism and dogmatism?

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[01:22:56] **Sam Harris:** Well, no, because I mean, it depends why you're impatient, right? Why you're rejecting the thing, right? So, it's, I mean, one way to say, I mean be becoming, less patient is, a, is kind of a harsher way of saying it.

[01:23:15] We, we have to be less, enticed by, you know, addicted to, lured by these things which people find so captivating, right? People really are captivated by tribalism and dogmatism. I mean, dogmatism is, it takes a lot of the friction out of anything you're doing because like, you don't have to reinspect your prior assumptions at all.

[01:23:38] your assumptions are good for all time. These are good, these assumptions are good for the end of the till, the end of the world, right?

[01:23:43] **Nate Hagens:** So if you were in a group of 10 people and, if a listener of this show is in a group of 10 people and they wholeheartedly agree with you on tribalism and dogmatism, what would be some steps that they could take?

[01:23:59] Alleviate that in the group that they're in, for example.

[01:24:02] **Sam Harris:** So if, you're in a group where, if there's any kind of political project, happening, you'll continually be confronted by people's, reasoning from, because the pseudo ethical reasoning from their identity, right. It's like something is true or good because they're the person they are, or they belong to the group that they belong to.

[01:24:29] Right. You know, as a Jew, as a black man, as a man, as a gay woman, as like, so like, let me tell you the, so it's fine to talk about, I'm not saying that a person's li quote, lived experience is always irrelevant, but it's re it's only relevant when you're talking about the character of somebody's experience.

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[01:24:48] Right. It doesn't, it's, it doesn't. It's not universal realizable, it's not real. Ethics can be generalized to everyone. Real e real ethics don't depend on you being who you are. They're precisely what's true when, regardless of who you are, right? They're, like, like they, they're, true of the situation where, you may not know who you're gonna be in that situation, right?

[01:25:13] Like, if we're all gonna try to figure out a, fair game to play. And this is, you know, the thought experiment that the philosopher John Rawles gave us. You know, I don't, agree with everything that Raws said, but, you know, when he was coming up with a theory of justice and ask him, you know, how to arrange a fair society, the exercise he recommended was to, put everyone in what he called the original position, where behind a veil of ignorance, you know, you, we can come up with what, how to order society.

[01:25:45] If each of us recognizes that we have to make these decisions without knowing who we're going to be in the society. So you don't know whether you're tall or short, you don't know whether you're healthy or unhealthy, you don't know whether you're black or white, we rich or poor, then we can begin to convert, converge on what would be fair, right?

[01:26:03] But if we're gonna, if we're gonna do our politics based on, listen, as a Christian, this is, IM what's important. No, as a Christian, you've just disqualified your, yourself from, with your, a your assay clause disqualifies you from saying anything especially important to ethics.

[01:26:23] **Nate Hagens:** I

[01:26:23] **Sam Harris:** understand, that this gets, you know, so, you, you find people doing that all the time and

[01:26:30] **Nate Hagens:** 99% of people

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[01:26:31] **Sam Harris:** Yeah, we basically, we have to call bullshit on that always and, forever because it's, it is leading us nowhere worth going.

[01:26:38] **Nate Hagens:** Would you alter that recommendations for young people listening to this show, or your show? What advice do you have, for young humans in their teens and twenties who are becoming aware of our economic and environmental constraints to the future?

[01:26:53] **Sam Harris:** I would, I actually wouldn't alter it for young people.

[01:26:56] I mean, I think they're. They're fighting from this same trench, right? They're just, they're, if anything, especially, you know, left of center, the, primacy of identity and identity politics has really been, imbibed by them in the water for as long as they've been alive. Right? I mean, this is just a, you know, the young people are, tend to be even more confused about this than people in our cohort.

[01:27:28] we have to your identity, you know, my basic argument is, identity. is identity. If it's entertained at all. Needs to be taken very lightly. I mean, identity is just for fun, right? Identity is just like being a sports fan, right? Like you have an identity as a Yankees fan. Say, well, okay, great.

[01:27:52] Well just how deep do you want that to reach, right? Do you want to kill something, someone over it? Do you want to be, do you want to fly into a rage when your team loses such that you know, you're, you're bad company for everyone in your life, right? Do you want to be, made neurotic and oppressed by the, ups and downs of your favorite team?

[01:28:13] No, you don't. We, recognize that sports fandom taken that far is fanaticism, right? It's just awful. It's like, so it's not, it's no longer fun. Okay? So if your, id, if you care about your identity as a Jew or as a Christian, or as a black

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man or a white woman, or what care about it, just at the level of this is just kind of the fun.

[01:28:40] These are just beautiful differences that are, you know, it's just decoration, right? It's nothing, there's nothing profound about it, right? What is profound is what is, deeply common, where we can all touch something fundamental about our circumstance here. And it's certainly deeper than the color of our skin or the accidents of our birth, or the, you know, even the religion that you got, drummed into you at Mother's Knee.

[01:29:10] there's something transcultural and non-sectarian and true and beautiful about our circumstance, and that's where we should be anchored.

[01:29:21] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you. what do you care most about in the world, Sam?

[01:29:25] **Sam Harris:** Well, it's, it really is these things and in aligning my life moment to moment more and more with what I know my deepest priorities are, right?

[01:29:36] I mean, it's the tragedy is that you can, have, you know, fundamental insights about all these things, and yet you really have to have them 10,000 times before they really begin to stick. And, you know, we're all in the game of

[01:29:55] struggling to take our own advice on some level. I mean, it's very easy to give great advice and we all know that. We all know the great advice to give. And if your friend needs some advice, you can, give your friend life-changing advice. That's incredibly wise. There's no, no problem doing that. I mean, you just, you know, we all have wisdom on tap, but on some level, wisdom is really nothing other than the ability to take your own advice.

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[01:30:19] **Nate Hagens:** And is the barrier between those two being distracted?

[01:30:22] **Sam Harris:** Yeah, it's being distracted by, it's, it may, on some level, it's wanting other things and being distracted by those wants, right? Caring about other things and being distracted, you know, for greater intervals by those things. Now, I'm not saying, I mean, I still experience a life where I want all kinds of things and get, get distracted by all kinds of things, and I have, you know, priorities and I have, disappointments and I have, you know, et cetera and things that are unpleasant and unpleasant.

[01:30:53] But the, the, the, degree of, departure from my deepest priorities has ha has become less and less right? And the half-life of that departure gets shortened. And when it really, when something really happens to destabilize me, you know, where like I suddenly, I'm really not the g the person I want to be.

[01:31:19] You know, that, that, goes off, there's kind of like a mindfulness alarm that goes off, you know, and it rings loudly and it becomes unignorable. and if you surround yourself with like-minded people who are also seeing their, life in the world this way and, your life in the world this way, then you also have good company that can remind you.

[01:31:38] It's like, you know, it is like, I, married the right person, right? I have a wife who will, you know, look across the table at me and, say like, why are, do you even care about this? Right? and it'll short circuit the thing that was, you know, tying me in knots unnecessarily. On some level, your life becomes a mirror.

[01:31:58] Increasingly an increasingly clear mirror by which you can keep catching yourself, falling short of your, own priorities, your, real priorities and the, that, you can, it's not in the, way to keep score. There is not a, matter of just never getting confused again, never getting distracted again, never falling and having to pick yourself up again.

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[01:32:24] No, it's, really in the, half-life, and the time it takes and the struggle it takes and, the kinda lightness and kind of humor with which those, the return can happen. And you begin to have a sense of humor about all of this. And it's, and a need not take long to suddenly be back precise, being precisely the person you wanna be.

[01:32:49] I mean, like really like just you. The thing that, and I'll give you an example. I. Driving and I got, stuck behind, living on a street where there's a lot of construction and I, so sometimes I'll get stuck behind construction and I, you know, it will delay me like 10 minutes getting outta my house.

[01:33:09] 'cause there's so much construction on the street. And, but I was here, I was really late for something and, it ma you know, in my ho in my head, it mattered. And I was very annoyed to find myself stuck behind a truck. And, you know, I got outta my car and I'm like, you know, talking to the construction guy, like, like, this is totally unacceptable.

[01:33:28] You guys are blocking the street. And I'm actually pissed off and expressing that and just caught right. And just, and you know, and then, but also I'm noticing that. I'm showing up. The way I'm showing up with these guys who I've never met is like, now I'm the jerk who's pissed off, who's making their job harder and all of that, right?

[01:33:48] And so like, there's like, I'm sort of, even though I'm pissed off and I'm late and I don't want to be late, and I actually, I'm feeling the consequences of being late. I'm also seeing myself in these, in the eyes of these guys and I'm thinking, this is not who I wanna be, right? this is, I'm part of the problem, right?

[01:34:06] Even though I'm right. You know, like on some level I'm right and they shouldn't be blocking the street. This is not who I wanna be. Right? And so like the, but so the, question is how long do you get caught for and how, and, what,

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comes online in the next moment And what, and how available are you to be free in the next moment and forgiving in the next moment?

[01:34:28] and so like in the next moment, like I, so I, the guy moves his truck and I pass him. I, and I could have just like, blown past him and realized, okay, I'm late now. I just gotta drive faster to get to where I'm going. But I realized like the toxicity of this moment was such that I just stopped my car and I got out and I just, I said, actually no, I didn't get out.

[01:34:48] I just had to roll down my window. And I, he rolled down his window. I, and I just said, listen man, I'm really sorry for how I spoke to you. And I was, it's not who I want to be and what it's, it wasn't your fault. And it just, I've just, you know, my day's gotten off on the wrong foot, and I just want you to know that, I've just, I feel bad about it and that, you know, you, didn't deserve it.

[01:35:06] Right. And just, and honestly, it was almost like the, effect on him was such that it was almost better that the whole thing had happened that way rather than it not have happened in the first place. Like, it's like, like, like being an asshole and successfully apologizing for it was almost better than not having been an asshole in the first place.

[01:35:28] Because it, because I could see that it gave this guy. Faith in humanity that he didn't have, he might not have had, had it just been a benign encounter where I just waited and he got out of the way and I drove past. That would've been one thing there would've been nothing salient about it.

[01:35:44] But I am absolutely sure that like, I disconfirmed everything. This guy thought about me when I apologized and the way I apologized felt like there was something redeeming about all of it. So it's, I'm not, recommending as a practice that you just, you know, you, be, be an asshole and then you apologize for it, and then you be an asshole again and you apologize for it.

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[01:36:06] But, there, there's an availability to those moments where you can just drop yourself and your story and, Success in life, in my view, is more, and more a story of that where you just keep dropping the problem. It's not that you never have, it's not that you never pick it up again, but you drop it faster and faster

[01:36:28] **Nate Hagens:** That rings true to me, and I can see how important that is, as a microcosm of society waking up. if you could wave a magic wand and there was no personal recourse to your decision, what is one thing you would do to improve the future?

[01:36:45] **Sam Harris:** Again, it's gonna echo some of the, thoughts, I've expressed here.

[01:36:50] I, I would wave away dogmatism or tribalism or both in some significant measure. I mean, so like a one shorthand version of this is I would wave away religious sectarianism, right? I'd get rid of what people think of as organized religion. that's to, to a first approximate.

[01:37:14] I mean, it's not, it doesn't solve all of our political problems, obviously, but I mean, as far as low hanging fruit, that's the kind of thing I would disappear.

[01:37:23] **Nate Hagens:** So, thank you, for your time and, continued passion and eloquence on these topics. Do you have any, well, let me ask you one final thing.

[01:37:33] if you were to come back 12, 18 months from now, is there any research question that is very alive for you now, relevant to human futures, that you would be interested in taking a deep dive on that we didn't cover today?

[01:37:50] **Sam Harris:** Well, I will be very, you know, 18 months from now I'll be very interested to see how, we're doing with respect to, some of these variables around, I mean, I guess AI is at the nexus of a lot of it, but.

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[01:38:12] You know, I'm very concerned about, Le Leave, leave. Alignment aside, leave existential risk aside, I'm just, I'm worried about the way social media and AI are going to supercharge our political hyperpolarization and the fragmentation of our society so that we're just not even talking about the same reality when we're no, when we're talking to one another.

[01:38:41] so if I, you know, if I could just, you know, pull out a crystal ball and, look ahead 18 months, I think it's the first thing I would look at is, what is happening, in that, frame of the movie.

[01:38:54] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Fully agree. Any closing comments for people watching listening who understand or are curious about and agree with what you've laid out here today?

[01:39:03] **Sam Harris:** Well, if they want any more of this, they can find me over at the, Waking Up app or, on the Making Sense podcast. I tend to, show up, on, both of those platforms, more than most. and also, but my book, waking Up does cover much of what we were talking about today.

[01:39:20] **Nate Hagens:** Sam Harris, thank you so much to be continued.

[01:39:23] **Sam Harris:** Yeah, thank you so much, Nate. Great to meet you.

[01:39:25] **Nate Hagens:** If you'd like to learn more about this episode, please visit [The Great Simplification dot com](https://thegreatsimplification.com) for references and show notes. From there, you can also join our Hilo community and subscribe to our Substack newsletter. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett and Lizzie Ani.

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[01:39:47] Our production team also includes Leslie Balut, Brady Hyen, Julia Maxwell, Gabriela Slayman, and Grace Brumfield. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you on the next episode.