

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning, friends. Art Berman led off this week's podcast by referring to the US-Israel war with Iran as the biggest blunder in human history, and this might be true. I am quite worried about, the future, and these past couple months, this worry is, a bit on turbocharge. And in reflecting on this, I honed in on what e-exactly it is that I'm feeling, and what I'm feeling is dread.

[00:00:41] And irrespective of how the situation in Iran resolves, I am already paying for it. Not in money, or lack of convenience, or higher grocery costs, or unavailable parts in the global supply chain, not yet. I am paying for it in my lack of daily attention to things, in my poor sleep, and this kind of low-grade but continual tightness in the middle of my chest whenever the thought spirals happen on the implications of this unfolding event interrupt my day, which is often.

[00:01:27] I'm guessing that many of you feel similar, and this is what dread does. Dread is like a tax we pay on a future that we cannot escape, or at least, we believe we can't escape it. And so I've been a bit obsessed with this, the last week, and the insight I had is that the dread itself that we feel may often be worse than the actual event.

[00:02:01] And the work I do on The Great Simplification has been kind of a public anatomy of difficult truths, global heating and net energy decline and the end of material growth and the fraying of the social contract, and as more of us are able to see, the soft feudalism on the horizon and biodiversity loss.

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[00:02:24] These are not abstractions to me. They're part of a synthesis I've spent most of my adult life building, and I believe this synthesis is roughly correct and, more correct each year. Which means I, and a growing number of you who have followed this conversation, are carrying around with us a particular kind of weight. It's a sort of psychological millstone around our necks about what's coming in the future, and that weight is changing people.

[00:03:03] I see it in the emails and the letters I get. I see it in the eyes of people who come up to me after talks, and I see it in myself, in various ways. There, there's a phrase that climate psychiatrist Lise Van Susteren, who in *Metacrisis* trivia, was my neighbor growing up, she coined, for this experience that many of us are going through with respect to the last few months, and the more than human predicament.

[00:03:43] She called it pre-traumatic stress. The actual trauma hasn't happened yet, but the body is already responding as though it has. And the amygdala, that almond-shaped structure deep in our brains, whose job it is to scream, "Fire!" when there is a fire, is screaming. The amygdala has no way to know whether the fire is in two months or in 20 years or is already smoldering in the floorboards.

[00:04:18] However, if the work we all are doing only ever delivers more reasons for more people to be afraid, then I think we'll have failed in some really important way. So the honest reckoning with what's coming is absolutely necessary, but it also isn't the whole picture. The other half, is the question of how a person, and ultimately how a society comprised of people, actually lives with all this knowledge without being eaten by it.

[00:04:59] so this is kind of a long-winded intro to what I'm going to call the second installment of a guide to staying human. The first episode was about reclaiming our agency, and this one is about responding to dread, 'cause for many of us who have come to see the shape of what's unfolding in our world,

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dread is like our daily weather, and learning to live inside it, within it without being consumed by it is, and will be for more people, I think, one of the foundational disciplines of being alive at the time we are.

[00:05:44] I actually feel an urgency to share the entire Guide to Staying Human series, which I'm still developing, and given events, I don't have time to do the proper science precursors for each of these segments. So today is kind of a mix of an overview of the science of dread, what is actually happening in our brains and in our body, but then also offer some pathways on what we might do with it.

[00:06:26] Okay. As I exhale, let's start with the human brain, which is where we probably should start on every single issue in the more than human predicament. when we encounter a threat, like a bear, an angry boss, or an unpaid bill, your amygdala lights up. It has direct, almost hardwired connections to your hypothalamus, which then triggers what's called the HPA axis, hypothalamus pituitary adrenal.

[00:07:03] And the result is then cortisol, a stress hormone, floods your bloodstream. Your heart rate climbs, and then blood is pulled away from your digestive system and pushed into your, your limbs. Your pupils dilate. The body, in less than a quarter of a second, has prepared you to either fight or flee. And this is one of the most beautifully evolved systems in the biological world.

[00:07:34] It saved our ancestors from countless lions and snakes and rival tribes. And in its proper context, this response is a gift. It's a lifesaver. The problem is, this system was tuned for threats that are immediate, brief, and physical. The bear charges and you run. You either survive or you don't, and either way, the cortisol clears.

[00:08:00] But the amygdala does not distinguish too well between a charging bear and a slow-moving, abstract, systemic risk about the future. To our

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amygdala, civilization decline reads as a threat. The EROI cliff reads as a threat. The upcoming Super El Niño this summer reads as a threat, and the multiple wars that are happening read as a physical threat.

[00:08:32] And once our brains see a threat, they activate that same machinery, except, and this is what I've recently, after being told a hundred times, finally understand that machinery never has a chance to discharge because there's no running and there's no fighting. There's just sitting and reading and more analysis of these scary things while cortisol sits in your blood hour after hour, week after week, and for some, even year after year.

[00:09:16] This is what neuroscientists call allostatic load. It is the price of an ancient threat response system that collides with a modern, abstract, slow-moving smorgasbord of threats. And the cost is pretty significant. Sustained cortisol elevation impairs the hippocampus, which is the part of brain that takes what happened today and puts it into your memory so it's something you'll remember tomorrow.

[00:09:50] It actually compromises and weakens physically the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for planning and for impulse control. And it dysregulates sleep and compromises your immune function. And it pushes people towards addictive behaviors because addictive behaviors are, among other things, ways that we subconsciously choose to temporarily silence that fire alarm in our brain.

[00:10:27] So the first thing to understand about dread, it's more than a feeling. It's actually a physiological body state. And in its chronic form, it actually narrows the cognitive bandwidth that we would need to face the very thing that we're dreading, which is the cruelest irony about dread. It shrinks the capacity we would need to face future challenges appropriately.

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[00:10:58] There are a lot of scientific studies that capture this phenomenon and measure what dread actually costs a person. In a famous one, and I've read up on all these the last few days, a team of scientists put people into a fMRI scanner and offered them a series of choices. And each choice was a trade-off between pain and time.

[00:11:26] And they could receive a more intense electrical shock soon or a milder shock after a much longer wait. Most people sensibly chose the milder shock option. But roughly 28%, so almost a third of people chose to receive more pain sooner just to get it over with and so they could avoid the waiting. The experimenters referred to these sorts of people as extreme dredders.

[00:12:00] Then later experiments by other researchers found an even more striking finding is at the limit, some participants would accept almost any additional shock just to escape the pain of the anticipation of pain. So the dread of the thing was, in very measurable terms, worse than the thing itself. Seriously, think about that.

[00:12:29] A third of us, when offered, an experimental choice, would rather suffer more now than suffer less later. The dread of waiting and letting this stuff stew in us itself is a form of suffering separate from and sometimes greater than the suffering of what we're actually dreading. And yet that dread is happening in the present, in the only moment any of us actually have now.

[00:13:04] We're paying in the real coin of our physiologies and our bodies for an event that has not yet occurred and may not occur in the form that we envision.

[00:13:21] So please pause for a moment and think about this as it applies to the more-than-human predicament, because this is the bind we're in, those of us who hold a long arc anticipation of civilizational difficulty, especially the young humans, among us. We're not necessarily extreme dredders by temperament.

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[00:13:46] We are extreme dredders by information. The data we are holding produces in many of us the same neurological state as a forty-minute wait for a stronger shock, but the wait isn't forty minutes. It's, like, years. And the shock in our case is nebulous at the edges and ginormous in its scale. Okay, so, not all dread is the same.

[00:14:22] There are, of course, different flavors. There's a kind of useful vigilance that gets you to winterize your house or make a doctor's appointment. And then there's Ruminantion, which is when you think over and over about a thing, and it feels like you're working, but it's really just circling in your mind.

[00:14:44] And then there's real dread, where the future emotionally collapses into the present. It's like you're carrying an incredible weight and dread, but you can still function, and your friends and family don't know your internal reality at all, just that you're kind of sad thinking about all the tough future stuff, but they're not aware of your agony.

[00:15:12] I've experienced all these flavors, and continue to. So the real question here is what to do with dread, because dread is likely a constant companion for those of us paying attention to, the biophysical reality that is the future of humanity and the biosphere. And I only have partial answers, but I've recently spent enough time in this headspace, read enough of the liter- literature on chronic stress, on trauma, on contemplative traditions, on grief, and talked to people in our circles that I think I can offer some pathways that might be helpful, at least directionally.

[00:15:57] None of these are silver bullets, but all of them used together might begin to change our relationship with dread. The first pathway is mental reframing. It's not denial of our situation. I'm not asking you to ignore the data or to pretend the data is wrong. The data is what it is. But the meaning that we layer onto the data is something we have at least some say in.

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[00:16:29] There's a difference between, we are doomed, and we are on a historical precipice of a period of profound upheaval and material contraction, and I am alive to witness and participate in this. Both can be true. The first one freezes you. The second one situates you. And a slight reframing like this is not lying to yourself.

[00:16:59] It is choosing among the many true things you could say about the situation, the ones that leave you able to act. This is essentially Victor Frankl's insight from Man's Search for Meaning. Even in conditions that we cannot change, we retain the freedom to choose the meaning that we layer on top of the situations. The second pathway is the body, and this sounds almost embarrassing to say in the context of civilizational analysis, and one that two or three years ago I would have probably rolled my eyes at.

[00:17:38] But the most reliable way to interrupt the cortisol loop is not through the mind. It is through the breath, through the vagus nerve, through movement. Purposeful, long exhalations, that are longer than the, inhalation, signal to our parasympathetic nervous systems that the threat has passed.

[00:18:05] Cold water on the face, which I do before every podcast, or cold water on the full body, which I rarely do but should, it does the same thing. And walking, outdoors measurably lowers stress hormones in study after study. None of these responses solves the underlying issues, but it does give you a working nervous system from which to engage, the underlying problem, and that right there is how we respond to the metacrisis, in my opinion, is one grounded nervous system at a time, which then snowballs and enables further responses.

[00:18:54] There's, a scholar, and practitioner, Peter Levine, who spent, like, almost 50 years studying and treating stress and trauma, and his somatic work addresses that for many of us, this unresolved fight or flight response has nowhere to discharge. So those of us that mostly inhabit our minds have to train

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our bodies to complete the response that the modern world prevents us, from doing.

[00:19:29] So I spent the first installment of this series on reclaiming agency, because I think that is a foundational discipline, the one that makes the others I'm gonna discuss possible, and I'm not gonna re-cover that here. But I will connect how agency specifically overlaps, with dread. Dread is the experience of being acted upon by a future that you cannot influence, and agency is the opposite stance.

[00:19:59] When you take a meaningful action that's within your reach, the brain's threat system gets a different signal than it has been receiving, and then what happens is the cortisol begins to clear, the fight or flight response quiets down, and the body learns slowly that you are not purely- a passive recipient of the future, which is how a lot of this often feels.

[00:20:27] You are also, in some small but real way, an author of it. And I think that's part of why agency work is so foundational, because agency goes to work on the cortisol itself. It can reach places that reframing and reasoning cannot. And my coach, if you're watching, my coach keeps reminding me that I cannot brute force my way to a calmer nervous system.

[00:21:01] Most of what I worry about today I cannot personally affect, but some small slice of it I can. I can and will later today plant this year's potatoes. Now, weeding them in two months is another story. I can build a relationship with a neighbor. I can voice this frankly to the TGS community. The action does not have to be commensurate with the scale of the problem to be psychologically and physiologically useful to us.

[00:21:36] It only has to be real and tip the scales just a bit in the direction you want, and it also has to be yours. okay, so the fourth pathway I will recommend is

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community, and I think this is one of the most underrated and most misunderstood, although I have talked about this periodically for years, because it took me probably over a decade not only to learn this, but to really feel it.

[00:22:06] And put simply, the dread that you hold alone is much heavier than dread held together with others. And the science on this is pretty striking. The simple presence of a trusted other person dampens threat response to our amygdalas. We are a social species, and our nervous systems are designed to co-regulate.

[00:22:30] So when you sit with people who see what you see, not to amplify each other's fear, but to witness together, something shifts in you. The dread doesn't disappear, but it stops being isolated and lonely. And lonely dread, I have come to believe and observe and feel, is the worst kind. I will unpack that in its own episode in the near future, but it deserves to be mentioned here.

[00:23:07] Okay. The fifth pathway that I've come up with is probably the hardest to talk about, but I think ultimately the most important. I will call it befriending the darkness. And this pathway assumes some baseline stability to do the work from. And if you're in acute crisis right now, this is not the moment for it.

[00:23:32] And professional support exists all over the place. For the rest of us, here's what I mean by this. There is a tradition across Buddhist contemplative practice, across Stoic philosophy, across the deeper histories of mysticism, throughout the work of psychotherapists like Francis Weller and the recently passed Joanna Macy, who spent decades sitting with people in ecological grief that says, "The way through dread is not around it, it is into it."

[00:24:08] You sit with the worst-case scenario. You let yourself feel it fully. You don't try to argue yourself out of the grief or the fear or the anger. You let the

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body have its response. And what tends to happen, if you can stay with it long enough, is something, unanticipated. The dread, when fully met, transforms.

[00:24:37] Not into hope, exactly. I actually think hope is still living in anticipation, but rather than negative, it's positive. But the fact is that you're still not living in the present moment. No, I think if you stay with and through dread, it transforms into something more like presence, which I have had glimpses of and I'm still trying to access more regularly.

[00:25:09] It's this kind of open-eyed clarity that says, "Okay, this is the situation. Yeah, much of what I've taken for granted and much of what I love might be lost, and I am here now in this body with these people, with this breath, with this meaningful work." the teacher Stephen Levine, who spent decades working with the dying, often noted how alive the dying frequently are.

[00:25:47] Not always, but quite often. I think there's something about facing the worst directly that strips away the noise and reveals what is actually here, which is mostly love and breath and this strange, wonderful fact of us being humans on Earth and being conscious at all at this time.

[00:26:19] So I think, and I'm just a student on this, that dread can, when fully metabolized, become a kind of teacher. It says, this conversation, this plate of nachos, these dogs and ducks running across the yard, this afternoon thunderstorm, this seedling potato, this is the gift, and let's not miss these things. So I think this movement from dread into presence is the bridge into the next installment of this series, which I hadn't planned to do till this summer, but events are, calling my spirit to do these sooner.

[00:27:13] But for now, I want to close with something practical because I know that for those of you doing this work or for those of you who've come to this work simply by remaining awake in a sleepwalking world, dread is real and abstractions

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can only do so much. So when the dread shows up, here's what I would offer based on the advice from many wise individuals in my sphere who have helped me process my own emotions.

[00:27:45] First, name it out loud if you can. I'm feeling dread about XYZ in the future, about complex global supply chains and diesel shortages and what that means to our society, especially the poorer half, not only in the United States, but in the world. Simply putting a feeling into words shifts the brain activity from the amygdala back to the fr- pr- prefrontal cortex.

[00:28:13] This is well-established, in the neuroscience. Daniel Siegel calls it name it to tame it. Actually works. Second, locate the feeling of dread in your body. Where do you feel it? Chest or stomach or throat? Just notice it. Don't try to fix it. The problem for me is that I am so much in my head, that it takes really a lot of time for me to articulate where I actually feel it, but eventually I can.

[00:28:49] Third, take five long exhales. Not deep breaths, just long exhales. In through the nose, out slowly through the mouth, longer. Much longer on the way out than on the way in. Fourth, ask, "What is one thing today within my reach that I can do?" today. Not solve, not fix, just do, and then go do it. And fifth, find one person to sit with this week.

[00:29:26] Again, not to fix anything, not to spiral on all these issues, just to be with. Tell them what you're carrying. Let them tell you what they're carrying. The carrying does not get lighter exactly, but it stops being yours alone, and so it feels lighter. We evolved for this. the only way that I've navigated the last 20 years is I have a band of brothers and sisters in my systems ecology group that we've been processing all this stuff for a very long time.

[00:30:01] The Great Simplification is going to be hard. I cannot and will not pretend otherwise, but the dread of The Great Simplification, if we let it run

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unchecked, will steal the very things that we're trying to protect. And the point of seeing clearly is not for us to suffer in advance. The point in seeing clearly about our world is to live with our eyes open in the time we are given with the people around us doing the work that is ours to do.

[00:30:40] And that work matters a great deal, I believe. The dread that many of us feel is real because the situation is real. Ecological overshoot, the carbon pulse winding down, all the things we discuss on this platform, these are not catastrophic predictions. They are unfolding facts on the ground, and our nervous systems are responding to information that our culture is still pretending isn't there.

[00:31:17] Dread is like reverse gravity that pulls us out of the present moment of our lives. And so learning then to metabolize dread is what makes presence possible. That is what I am trying to learn. and I'm actually quite a good candidate, to learn this, and to share what I'm learning. I have not learned it yet, but I'm trying.

[00:31:45] I actually think that's enough. I think that trying actually be, may be most of it. and that's where part three in this series will pick up soon on presence and the default mode network. much more to say. thank you for being part of this community. I will see you soon.