

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Something happened to me a few weeks ago that precipitated this, frankly. I sat down with a cup of coffee at around 5:30 in the morning. I get up early so I can feed the animals and get a bike ride in before it gets too hot. the light was coming over the field behind the house, and it was that gray pink that lasts just a few minutes before it turns into an ordinary day.

[00:00:31] I had my coffee in my hand, and I was facing the window. And at some point, like five minutes later, I came back to myself and realized that I had not really seen any of it. I had been somewhere else. I had been specifically in late twenty twenty-six. I'd been imagining a scenario about diesel rationing due to refinery constraints.

[00:01:00] My coffee was gone, and the beautiful, morning dawn light was gone. and the Baltimore Oriole that comes this time of year to eat the oranges I put out had come and gone. And I'd been ten feet away, and somewhere else entirely. So today I wanna talk about presence, about actually being here in the now as a specific problem for those of us who have spent years building an intellectual synthesis about where this civilization is going.

[00:01:40] Because the work that has made me useful, I think, in some small way has also made me peculiarly absent from my own life, and I would bet I'm not alone in this

[00:02:07] I've lived this kind of absence for a long time. You could say I've, I have had a front row seat to this particular cost, and the work that I do, has depended on it. It's probably cost me more than I have recognized until recently, and I'll come back to that later. When you spend 20 years modeling futures, your mind

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develops habits, and it drifts forward in time, and my brain runs scenarios, when it has nothing else to do.

[00:02:44] It runs scenarios when it does have something else to do. It runs them while you're eating, while you're on a hike, while you're watching the dawn light come up. And the habit is probably what has allowed this work, but it has a cost. the only place life ever actually occurs, which is here, now, this breath, this meal, becomes a place you visit only briefly between these simulations.

[00:03:23] And the neuroscience here, which I've dove into recently, matters, and I'm gonna start with that because deep within the brains of Homo sapiens lies both the generator and the viable responses to the more than human predicament. There's a study I recently learned about. Two psychologists at Harvard sampled the moment-to-moment experience of thousands of adults, like a quarter million, moments via, a phone app, and they pinged them at random throughout the day and asked, "What are you doing?

[00:04:01] What are you thinking about? And how do you feel?" And what they found was remarkable. People's minds were wandering. That is, they were thinking about something other than what they were doing forty-seven percent of waking life, almost half. And quelle surprise, people were less happy when their minds were wandering than when their minds were not, regardless of the task.

[00:04:33] Even unpleasant tasks were experienced as more satisfying when they were fully attended to than pleasant tasks done with a wandering mind. They titled this paper, "A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind," unusually direct for a peer-reviewed paper. I will put it in the show notes. and in a related study, I think over 30 years ago now, research noticed there was a set of brain regions that consistently deactivated whenever subjects engaged in a task and then reactivated the moment the task ended And, they eventually published this canonical paper proposing the existence of what came to be known as the default

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mode network, DMN for short, because it described what the brain defaults to when not externally engaged.

[00:05:42] So in the years since, the default mode network has become one of the most studied structures in neuroscience and, we've only covered it once, on this platform, in my recollection in Taylor Guthrie's episode, which you should check out. The DMN is a network of brain regions, including parts of the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus that fire together in synchrony and that activate the moment that you stop engaging in a task.

[00:06:17] So what does this network do? It does self-referential processing, thinking about yourself, your traits, your history, your situation, what others think about you. It also does theory of mind, modeling other people's mental states, imagining what someone is thinking, what they intended, how they will react if you say something.

[00:06:45] And it does spontaneous thought, the wandering, associative, image-laden flow that occurs when attention is not pinned to a specific task. And it does mental time travel, remembering the past and simulating the future. It turns out the hippocampus, which stores our memories, is the same structure used to construct hypothetical futures.

[00:07:18] People who have damage to their hippocampus actually cannot imagine future scenarios. I cannot imagine that. To imagine tomorrow, you're using the same equipment with which you remember the past, which I thought was pretty interesting. Mental time travel like this is probably one of the great cognitive achievements of our species.

[00:07:45] it's how we plan harvest and anticipate the winter, and prepare for childbirth and build cathedrals and monuments, and move towards regenerative

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futures, as planetary stewards perhaps. Self-narrative is what gives life its coherence, and theory of mind is also the foundation of human cooperation.

[00:08:17] So the default mode network here is the center of what makes us peculiarly human. so viewed from that vantage, the capacity to leave the present moment is a superpower for us as individuals and for our species. We need the default mode network in our daily lives, so we should not think of this as a bug in our physiology.

[00:08:46] The problem is the chronic dominance of this network in people alive today, at least in the global West and North. Most of the time, in healthy mental life, attention flows fluidly back and forth between the DMN and another system called the TPN, the task positive network, the brain in attentive contact with what is in front of it.

[00:09:16] And these two systems are, anti-correlated. When one is up, the other is down, and you leave the present in order to plan, but then you come back, and you drift into your memories, and then you return. That's the design. But what modern conditions do, the iPhone, the news cycle, the attention economy and, for those who have taken on the more than human predicament and the meta-crisis, the weight of what we've come to understand, this all tipped the balance heavily towards the default mode network and keeps it there.

[00:09:56] So science now tells us that chronic DMN dominance has predictable and measurable consequences, reduced gray matter in the hippocampus over time, increased rates of depression and anxiety, diminished sensory processing. The world literally looks duller and feels less present because the network that processes the present is being outcompeted by the network that processes the future and the past. What this looks like in daily life, to many of you is probably familiar.

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[00:10:39] you drive your usual route to the store and you arrive with no memory of your drive because your task-positive system handled the driving on autopilot while the default mode network ran whatever movie, it was running. Most people probably experience this several times a day. You read a page in a book and at the end of the page you know you read the words, but none of their meaning registered because your mind was elsewhere.

[00:11:09] I've been doing this for decades, and only since researching this did I understand what's actually happening. other, examples, you take a shower and you emerge realizing that you have been thinking the whole time. The shower is famous as a creativity zone precisely because it's a sensory environment so familiar that it requires no attentional resources, which frees up your default mode network to roam.

[00:11:43] This is why insights come in the shower or in my case, on my bike routes. You have a conversation in which you are actually rehearsing your reply rather than listening. This is the default mode network running a social simulation, what you will say, how it will land, and the actual person across from you is reduced to a stimulus, not a human being.

[00:12:13] For many, time appears to accelerate as we age. This is partly DMN related. Children spend much more of their day in task-positive, sensory immediate processing. Everything is new. Everything demands their attention. But as we age and our routines automate, a larger percentage of our day, almost by definition, runs on the default mode network, which compresses subjective time because the DMN does not lay down, super rich memories the way that novel sensory engagement does.

[00:12:58] So the years feel short, partly because we're not actually present for most of them Okay, so how does this apply to our lives and especially apply to viewers of this platform? several specific features of metacrisis awareness make

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default mode network capture worse and more powerful than for the average modern human.

[00:13:29] First, thinking about the future through this lens has an emotional component. Our thoughts are often loaded with grief and fear and anger and sometimes moral outrage, and the DMN preferentially processes what matters most. The very importance of what we understand is what makes it so colonizing of our mental lives.

[00:13:59] Second, I think our metacrisis simulations have no resolution. Most worries that the default mode network runs eventually resolve. The test passes. The difficult conversation we were dreading is had. But the metacrisis simulation has no real endpoint, and so the default mode network keeps running it because it never gets the closure signal, like I talked about dread last week.

[00:14:33] third, the simulation is, most of us are running in our brains, is socially isolating. Most people in our lives do not share this model. So the DMN is also running social simulations. How do I talk to my brother about this? Why does my partner not see this? What do I tell my children? these layered simulations probably multiply the load, that we carry Fourth, our vocation itself requires default mode network engagement.

[00:15:18] If you're a metacrisis researcher or writer or just an attentive citizen, your job is to run the simulations. You cannot stop. The DMN is your professional instrument or tool. So the very mode that is eating our present life is the mode our work depends on. so lastly, and this one-- they all do, but this one really hits home because it implicates me directly.

[00:15:54] There is a moral dimension that licenses the absence. The metacrisis-aware person can rationalize, often correctly, that their preoccupation

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with the future is necessary and appropriate, that being fully present at a birthday party while the world burns would be an obscenity or feel that way.

[00:16:20] This is the trap, because it's easy to feel like it's the only logical conclusion. The moral seriousness that drives this work enables or licenses chronic absence from one's own life. And then the absence becomes a sign of how much one cares.

[00:16:48] But I've learned absence is not care. Absence is absence, and the children growing up next to an absent parent will not remember that the parent was thinking important thoughts. They will remember that the parent was not there. The metacrisis-aware mind often experiences default mode network time as more real than present time, because the DMN content collapses and contracts and loses intervention, that all feels weightier than the apparent triviality of the present moment, the dinner or the weather or the cat.

[00:17:31] I recently came to see this as a sort of inversion of reality. The default mode network content is modeled. The present moment is actual. However, our felt sense of importance reverses this. The model feels solid, and the present feels watered down and un-interesting to us. I'm assuming that many of you are tracking this and feel, like I'm describing.

[00:18:08] And I think this inversion is one of the central pathologies of how this work has trained our minds. And not all absence is the same, because some forward thinking is necessary when you plan and you model and you strategize. The surgeon, that did my knee surgery had to visualize the operation. The farmers around here, despite fertilizer up fifty percent in cost, they have to think about next season.

[00:18:39] So the mark of healthy mental time travel is that you can leave the present, do the work elsewhere, and come back. The traveling mind returns. And

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there's a second kind, which we might call, drift. The mind wanders because the present has become less compelling than the simulations. Drift is what's happening when we scroll, when you're at dinner and not at dinner.

[00:19:11] It feels like nothing. That's a part of its power. But it is this slow, erasure of one's life. And then there's a third kind, which I'll label it future capture. This is when the future is so loud and so vivid and so saturated with implications and consequences that the present just can't compete with it.

[00:19:41] This is the territory of the meta-crisis aware mind. The future isn't a place we visit. It is a place we live, and the present becomes a kind of waiting room. It's provisionally pleasant sometimes, but always a waiting room, and the laughter of children and the taste of food and the light on the horizon in the field, all of it has the quality of somehow being a prologue to something else, of becoming somehow not the thing itself.

[00:20:25] And this future capture is what full default mode network dominance feels like from the inside when the content is civilizational. It's the same phenomenon I called full dread in last week's Frankly, but viewed from a slightly different angle. Dread is what it feels like. Future capture i-is what it does to our attention.

[00:20:53] And I think both are the mind unable to leave a future it cannot stop modeling I have lived in future capture for years, dare I say decades. Much of the work I've done has depended on it, and it has cost me more than I have wanted to admit. but now I am aware of it. so what do we do with all this?

[00:21:28] I've come up with, five pathways with the help of, some research and my coaches. They're at least directions and knowing that none of them is sufficient and all of them together are just a beginning. The first is the senses. The mind cannot be in the future and in the body at the same time. Not really.

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[00:21:53] So when you find yourself gone, the most reliable way home is through the senses. What do I hear right now? What do I see? What is the texture of this coffee cup against my hand? This is what every contemplative tradition has known for thousands of years and what neuroscience is now confirming. Somatic attention quiets the default mode network.

[00:22:22] The Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh built an entire body of work around this. Drink the tea, wash the dish, walk the path. Each of these is an entire practice if done with the senses awake and aware. The second is the pause, a speed bump before the reach. And there's a moment, almost subliminal, between the impulse to grab the phone and the actual grabbing of the phone.

[00:23:02] It's the same moment before the news app, before the email, before the next thing. And in that moment, if you can find it, and if you're like me, at first you will not find it, and that's okay, there is a small window of choice. And most of the practice of presence in our supernormal, unbelievable modern era comes down to learning how to recognize that tiny window.

[00:23:34] Doesn't mean don't reach, just acknowledge when you reach that you are reaching and what that reaching takes you away from, which is almost always this right here, the thing you actually have but didn't realize you had or appreciated it. The third suggestion is single-tasking. And then that we have this ideology of multitasking, which I think is one of the great lies of, late stage industrial era.

[00:24:16] The brain actually does not do two attentional tasks at once. It switches between them badly at a large cognitive cost. To eat while reading, while half listening to a podcast, while glancing at the phone, in reality is to do four things poorly and to be fully present for none of them. Choose one.

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[00:24:41] Whatever you're doing, try to do it as the only thing. I know this is very good advice, but this entire episode might also be a self-help guide from Nate to Nate, because it's less easy for me to actually do these things, but I am trying. The fourth is beauty, and Ian McGilchrist highlighted this in a recent podcast that the human nervous system is built to be arrested by beauty.

[00:25:18] The oriole eating the orange you put out for it, the way the wind moves a particular tree branch, the face of someone you love when they don't know you're looking, Frank looking at me like I'm his entire universe When you let yourself be stopped, when you stop, when the world offers you something like those things, that actually is the practice of presence.

[00:25:49] Beauty, defined by you, is the present moment announcing itself And the metacrisis-aware mind has often trained itself to push beyond these announcements because there's so much heavier real work to do I now think this is a mistake. The announcements are the work, or at least an essential part of it, to get us into the psychological, physical space to do the work.

[00:26:25] The fifth path or suggestion, is the hardest, and I don't know whether to call it the gift of finitude or prescience or perhaps even awe. The reason that presence is so difficult and so important for many people, but especially those of us who have learned what we're learning on this platform, is that we've been given a strange and terrible gift.

[00:26:58] We've been given a sharper than usual awareness of the contingency and connectedness of everything. the species on Earth that go extinct, the forests that burn, the institutions that, will likely fail, the carbon pulse that, is depleting. We, carry these things as, a daily companion, the knowledge that what is here today will not always be here, and that the ordinary world is not ordinary, and that this particular Baltimore Oriole and this particular cup of coffee and the morning

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light, on that morning a couple weeks ago that I missed These have never happened before, and they will not happen again.

[00:27:56] And all these things are not guaranteed to anyone. And such awareness held wrongly is the driving engine of our dread. I talked about that last time. But if we held these things differently, and I can envision this, but not quite actualize it fully myself, it's the engine of presence. Because if everything is contingent and if the present is the only place where contingent things can be experienced and received, then attention to the present moment becomes the most appropriate possible response to the situation we find ourselves in There's a phrase from the Christian contemplative tradition, the sacrament of the present moment, from some priest I forget the name of who used it in the eighteenth century.

[00:28:57] The idea is that whatever is occurring right now is the form in which life is being given to you, and to be elsewhere is some sort of a refusal of this gift. And across traditions, across centuries, there are similar conclusions to this. The present is the whole of life presenting itself to you in installments.

[00:29:27] If the work I do on The Great Simplification has any meaning at all, I think it must come down to this. The future is what we are trying to protect, but the present is the only place we can protect it from. And to say the world is precious and finite and rapidly changing, and then to spend our days imagining twenty thirty-five or twenty fifty is to abandon the one position from which anything can actually be done.

[00:29:59] Presence is the ground our work stands on. And carrying this knowledge does not set us apart. It ties us more tightly to what is here now. And anything less, is a way of conceding, what we claim to be defending. Like last week, I, will close with something, intended to be practical, 'cause these abstractions are not that helpful.

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[00:30:30] and again, I'm, giving this advice to myself as well. So when you've noticed that you've left the present, try this. First, don't scold yourself. The default mode network is gonna activate ten thousand times a day no matter what time, w- w-what you do. scolding is just another form of leaving.

[00:30:56] Notice instead that you actually have come back. It's the coming back to this moment that's the practice, and you will come back a thousand times. This actually I, I have been, increasingly able to do. Second, choose one daily encounter that you commit to being fully present for. That first cup of coffee, the hike around the field with the dogs, lunch with your girlfriend.

[00:31:29] One thing every day that you do as if it were the only thing. This is small, but it does serve as a foundation

[00:31:42] Lastly, practice receiving each thing as if it were the last. The last cool morning, the last conversation with the person sitting across from you. Receive these things with tenderness and with gratitude. Some of them will actually be the last, and we will never know which, and the only response that does justice to that fact is to fully be here, for those moments

[00:32:20] The Great Simplification is going to be hard. we are likely going to lose, some or much of what we love. Some of it is already gone, in slow motion. Some of it is going as we speak. And the temptation, given all that, is to live in the going, to spend our days in the projected future where we're bracing for the next loss.

[00:32:47] I understand this temptation, and I have not personally escaped it. I'm not sure escape, is the right word there. But I notice when I manage to come back, even briefly, that the world is still here in its splendor and its blue-green magnificence. This morning, I listened to, 30 different species of birds on a cloudy, rainy, misty day on my back porch, and it's just verdant green.

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[00:33:19] That light I missed, couple weeks ago will still be here at 5:30, and the oriole and its babies will still arrive, and the coffee is hot and dark and bitter and good. Being present for these things is not going to solve anything, nor will it lessen what's ahead, but it is the life that we have. It's the only life and the only moment we have, and to miss it because we're imagining and watching for its end is the deepest kind of loss.

[00:34:02] If it's not apparent by now, I felt this episode very personally, both the content and its implications, because the default mode network in my life, has been quite dominant it all points to these pathways that I'm trying to walk myself with mis- mixed success so far. I see the path, and I strongly sense that these are the right directions.

[00:34:38] and I'm grateful for the company, on this journey. Lots more to say  
Thank you.