

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. If you have been following this channel, you know that I have a lot to say. and I have so much more to say, in the near future. I've got 15 Franklys in various stages of completion, including What Is Debt and Why Does It Matter, Seven Ways Growth Ends, 15 recommendations, unordinary recommendations for the metacrisis, and lots of other things.

[00:00:34] I wanna finish this series first, and I had outlined part five in this series to be about no-regret responses to all the composite worlds we built from part four. But on a bike ride, I realized something interesting, so I'm gonna punt that to part six, and this is part five. This whole series has been about civilizational futures, two-by-two grids that describe growing or contracting economies, different power structures, geopolitics, and Earth systems, painting descriptive pictures of life in the various composite worlds and mapping the valleys and ridges and switchbacks of how we might get there.

[00:01:22] All macro scale stuff with an aim to help us think about what's coming for societies and nations and the biosphere, so we can make better decisions, and more often also to steer away from bad ones. But every single person watching or listening to this will also be navigating a personal version of those same landscapes, and I realize that the dynamics I've presented so far are strikingly similar.

[00:01:57] There's probably a rhyming micro version of these macro frameworks. So today, that's what I wanna do. I wanna turn the lens inward and ask, how might these future landscapes map to the scale of a single human life? And how do we navigate towards the better valleys of the future for ourselves?

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[00:02:33] So across this series, we built four grids: economic, power, geopolitics, and the earth system, and then we combined them into four composite worlds. I suggest those same dyn- dynamics have parallels in our individual lives. And what I came up with, is I'll go through four things, two that we navigate, which is material throughput and agency, and then two that are foundations underneath that constrain what's possible.

[00:03:08] So let's start with throughput. At the macro level, we ask whether the economy will be growing or contracting, and whether that growth or contraction is mostly regenerative or primarily destructive and extractive. At the personal level, the question is pretty much the same: Is your material throughput and the related complexity in your life expanding or simplifying?

[00:03:40] And in either of those cases, is that building you up or wearing you down? These two things are interdependent from each other. You can be expanding your income, your career, your commitments, your material consumption, and all that expansion can be regenerative for you if it's actually aligned with your health and what matters to you.

[00:04:10] If the growth, the material growth that you have is in capability and relationships and meaning and personal development, it can be replenishing or even expanding your own capacity for the various futures. Or it can be extractive. Your career grows, but it sucks all your time with your kids or your dogs or your time outdoors.

[00:04:35] Your income rises, but your health declines because of the things you have to do to fuel it. Your social status and your social presence might be expanding, but the depth of your actual relationships is thinning out at the same time. More activity and consumption, but depleting your ability to actually live life.

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[00:05:02] On the other hand, you can be simplifying, spending less, owning less, and doing less, and that can be regenerative too. You drop some obligations that were draining you, and you discover you sleep better and you think more clearly because your body now actually has time to recover in a natural, non-modernity sense.

[00:05:27] On the other hand, it can also just be plain decline. You're contracting because you're exhausted or you've given up, or you just can't sustain what you were doing anymore. Your simplification wasn't chosen. It just kind of arrives so personal Mordor is the one I think most of the TGS audience might recognize and resonate with per- perhaps in an uncomfortable way.

[00:05:56] Your material throughput is expanding. The scorecard our culture taught us to look at, income and career and productivity and social status says you're doing great, but underneath you're drawing down the principle, your health, your closest relationships, your creative capacity, your ability to stay present in the moment.

[00:06:24] In contrast, personal long repair is the one that looks like failure by many of those same metrics of success, but personally feels like coming back to life. Just like the civilizational version on the surface, this will look like decline to most people in our media, in our culture, less status, less stuff, less busy, probably less money.

[00:06:56] But better rested, more meals cooked at home, more connection to the green web of life outside, more actual conversations, deeper, meaningful relationships, more attention to this moment. Okay, your agency, the second thing. At the macro level, we asked who holds power and who benefits? The personal version might be who actually controls your time, your attention, your daily decisions, and who benefits from your efforts?

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[00:07:43] What is your actual agency? Think back to the four sources of power from part two of this series, military, political, financial, and technological, I think. At the personal level, those might roughly translate to your own biology, your social expectations, your existing financial obligations, and the technology and the platforms that structure your daily attention.

[00:08:17] So is our time genuinely ours? Or does our employer own pretty much all our daylight hours and our mortgage owns our nightly anxieties? Do our social commitments and expectations own most of our weekends? And then our phone owns all the gaps in between. We might feel like we're making all the choices, telling ourselves that those hours scanning the news or every extra overtime late night at work on some special project and each new obligation we say yes to is a choice made by us.

[00:09:07] But if we tracked it honestly as I've been doing, who actually decides how our hours get spent and who or what captures the value of that? Concentrated power and narrow gains, this is the personal version of what I called captured democracy, the persons whose life is full of freedoms, but actually lives more like a trap.

[00:09:40] Every day you get make-- to make lots of choices in your life, but the choices are pretty much predetermined by your debts and obligations, your behavioral habits, and your phone. Feels like freedom, but it doesn't really function like freedom, broad agency and broad gains, that's the person whose time actually reflects their values.

[00:10:09] They're not free of obligations, but the commitments they do make are mostly the ones they chose, and the benefits flow back to them and the people and the things they care about. Okay, so those are the first two, material throughput and agency. They describe what you're doing with your life, but whether any of that is sustainable, depends on what's happening underneath.

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[00:10:40] so just like at the civilizational level, there's a layer underneath that constrains everything else, and at the macro scale, that is the earth system and geopolitics. At the personal level, it's two foundational things, and they're slower, they're much deeper, and they're, less responsive to our conscious decisions because they're built up over years of choices and all the stuff that we didn't choose, our childhood, our genetics, our traumas, our experiences, and luck.

[00:11:19] They are the ground that our personal composite futures sit on. So there's two of these. Foundation one is your body and your nervous system. This is your personal earth system. It bats last. How much sleep debt are you carrying? How regulated is your nervous system? What does your baseline kind of feel like when nothing is wrong?

[00:11:49] Are you rested and calm and capable? Or are you running on caffeine and cortisol and compulsions? We can ignore these for a while, years even. Our bodies will keep performing, but it does set an upper limit on everything else. And just like the Earth system at the macro level, by the time the indicators show something is clearly wrong, the damage is often pretty advanced, and recovery then takes a long time.

[00:12:25] A person whose body and nervous system are intact has buffers. They can absorb a bad week or even a bad month. They can think clearly under pressure. But a person whose foundations are depleted has no buffer, and a setback can then cascade, and new demands on their time feel difficult or even impossible, not because the person is weak or they made a mistake, but because there's just not much left to constitutionally draw on.

[00:13:05] So this foundation is either providing you with optionality for the future or it's removing your optionality. And no amount of good decisions about throughput and agency make up for a foundation that's crumbling. Okay, the

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second part of your foundation is your relational web. This is akin to your personal geopolitics, the quality and depth of real human connections.

[00:13:35] Not your network or your social media followers, but the people in your life who would show up at two in the morning if you had a problem and called them. The people who know what you're actually going through and take the time to be with you because they care. This inner network also determines what's possible when things get hard.

[00:14:00] If your relational web is strong, a personal long repair trajectory is definitely achievable because you have people to simplify with, to share emotional or physical burdens with, to hold you accountable, to remind you who the real you is when you forget. If this group of humans and potentially non-humans doesn't exist or is high drama, stress is gonna push you towards isolation and rigid behavior or worse, towards things unraveling entirely regardless of how well you manage your throughput, and your agency.

[00:14:42] So we can all make the right decisions about throughput and agency. We might simplify perfectly and reclaim our time, but if we do this alone without deep relationships, without a community, without others who actually know us, I think given what's ahead, we are building on sand. Okay, so the four personal composites come together the same way the macro ones did in the prior episode, by combining all four.

[00:15:20] So personal long repair, deliberately simplifying, genuine real agency, body and nervous system intact with a strong relational web. All that is hard and aspirational and requires at a minimum an open and continued honesty with yourself

[00:15:49] I'm gonna be talking more about that in the Guide to Staying Human series, because I'm not only a spokesman for all this work, I'm also a client. and it

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requires me to be honest with myself about a lot of these issues. The long repair is probably the hardest personal composite to reach and the easiest for us to lose because of a stressful month or some seductive job offer or a crisis and we backslide.

[00:16:23] But this is the only personal trajectory that is genuinely regenerative to the human over the long term. Personal Mordor, in contrast, expanding throughput, captured agency, our body slowly depleting, and relationships maintained but mostly at a surface level. The cultural scoreboard says everything is fine.

[00:16:50] Everything is not fine. And just like civilizational Mordor, the danger is that you're using up the resources that you would personally need for a graceful transition, your health, your close relationships, your time. And again, by the time the metrics catch up to reality, your options probably have narrowed

[00:17:15] This has been the path I've been on, much of the first six months of this year after my knee surgery and the recovery collided with the Hormuz situation and all that entailed. After recording this, I'm about to take a two-week break, and I look forward to that, deeply. What's next? personal fortress.

[00:17:41] Perhaps a simplified life and some sense of agency, but mostly through an illusion of control. Maybe well-prepped for what's coming, but mostly doing it alone. You're rich in financial capital, poor in all the others. You have all the physical pieces, but your walls are up, so you're not integrated with the neighbors, and that constant self-management and vigilance is exhausting and shallow.

[00:18:18] This life is survivable for sure, but not flourishing. And just like in the civilizational version, it's both energetically and monetarily expensive to maintain such a personal fortress. Lastly, personal unraveling. Things are coming apart in

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more than one area at once. Your health gets worse while your throughput grows to pay for medical expenses.

[00:18:45] Your relationships are fraying. There's no real structure to the days because you're mostly just reacting to whatever is coming next. This isn't because of weakness, it's because the ground underneath gave way and everything on top shifted with it. This is the personal equivalent of cheap fossil energy giving us perpetual mulligans in our lives, and the new rules won't allow them.

[00:19:11] And each of the coming setbacks kind of hits you before you've recovered from the last one, leaving you like the Red Queen running faster just to stay in place. In the last episode, I talked about a gravitational pull that creates feedbacks and those same feedbacks in the civilizational composites I think match in our personal landscapes.

[00:19:40] When our body is depleted and there's nobody in our corner, but we still feel the need to keep pushing forward to pay for our mortgage and our food and our lifestyles and keeping up appearances, our agency shrinks and our throughput kind of defaults to full-on extraction because we just don't have the bandwidth for anything else.

[00:20:07] Stress plus scarcity of personal energy or money pulls us towards personal fortress mode, the same way in the civilizational composite that scarcity plus fear pulls towards authoritarian consolidation. It becomes a path of least resistance and maybe even the path that our cultural memes and courage.

[00:20:36] It's an easy decision. It's what happens when the foundations erode and we just stop switching back and the civilizational asymmetries hold here too, I think. I think it's easier to slide from personal long repair into personal fortress when you're under stress than to climb from personal Mordor into personal long

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repair, because that climb will require you to at least partially give up the metrics that cultural stories tell you that everything's fine.

[00:21:12] It-- That move requires you to look at the scoreboard and say, you know what? I think I'm measuring the wrong things." And honestly, that's a related confusion from part four in this series, healing versus dying, just at the scale of one life. The personal future most worth building looks like failure to a culture that measures everything by growth and productivity and bling and flexing and business and likes.

[00:21:50] I honestly think this is changing, before our eyes. Okay, so what's the bottom line of why I added this, speculative episode in this series? This exercise reminds us that when we think about the future, on this channel we're usually thinking about societal and planetary futures, yes. But we're also thinking about our futures, and we're trying to prepare for and improve both.

[00:22:24] Of course, it goes without saying, and I'll say it anyway, as individuals, we won't be here in the longer term, but civilization and the biosphere will in some form. But what we do now shapes what they become. Most people, when they try to change their lives, focus on the flashier actions. What should I do differently?

[00:22:49] How should I spend my time? What should I consume or buy? What should I stop consuming or cut? Those are all throughput and agency questions. But skipping your foundations is like building economic policy on top of a degrading biosphere. Am I sleeping enough? Am I getting enough rest? Am I mostly calm in my body?

[00:23:17] And can I get back to that calmness when stress hits me? Do I have people around me who actually know me and like me and care about me? Am I attuned to when my body is giving me slack and buffers? And am I attuned to

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when it has less to give and I need to take a break to get my spaciousness? Is my relational web strong enough to hold a difficult period?

[00:23:45] Do I spend enough time in green, wild places? My sentiment here is, and my point is, we can have the best plans in the world, but if what's underneath them is crumbling, our plans are not gonna hold. And this foundational work is not glamorous, nor is it really particularly strategic in the game of social power and acceptance.

[00:24:15] It doesn't feel productive by most metrics our culture currently respects. It's more sleep and walks and cooking food and sitting with a- another person without having any agenda. It's the potatoes you bring to your neighbor, and I'm gonna have 10 bushels of those this year probably, because I spent the time to weed and mulch and take the little potato beetles off. I can't eat 10 bushels in a winter.

[00:24:50] it's all those things. It's putting the phone down at 7:00 PM even though your brain is insisting on just one more video or one more check of the social media feeds. All this stuff is personal switchbacking. It's unglamorous and difficult work, just the piece of the future landscape that's right in front of us, and no one other than you is gonna see this or give it likes.

[00:25:21] The progress, just like building the cultural switchbacks I've been discussing, builds so slowly that you will not be able to see it week to week, but you will see it month to month and year to year. It's the kind that when the ground finally shifts underneath our civilization in a big way, it's this progress that turns out to be the real thing that keeps us steady, that keeps us oriented

[00:25:54] I'm gonna have a lot more to say about this because I do increasingly deeply believe that the more people building these switchbacks in their own life is a prerequisite for all the important cultural work ahead of the long repair. So the

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questions I leave you with rhyme with the ones from the macro series, but with a mirror.

[00:26:23] Which personal composite are you living inside right now? Not which one do you want to be in, but the one that, if you're honest, you're actually in from day to day. Are you generally switchbacking or eroding at the level of your foundations, like your body, your nervous system, your actual human relationships?

[00:26:47] Are you building things that will hold or are you letting it wash out while you focus mostly on throughput, and agency? Just reflect on those, because I have been. The good news, if there is good news, is that personal switchbacks are available to all of us right now exactly where we are. They do not require permission or institutional reform.

[00:27:18] They just require honesty with ourselves about where we are and the willingness to let go of the expectation rooted in where we've come from and all that baggage. And then just a tiny small act, like I talked about in the Guide to Staying Human and Agency, just one act in the right direction and then another and another, and it creates positive feedback.

[00:27:45] Th- this was an odd episode that I just juttet into this series and I wanted to try. I am never gonna be some self-help guy on the internet, thankfully for me and for you. But I am gonna be the guy that recognizes the importance of maintaining the foundations in your life. I increasingly think the people that will be most helpful to changing the initial conditions of the future will be those who have changed the initial conditions of their future selves, and in doing so enlarge the capacity of society to better respond to what's ahead.

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[00:28:36] So now we can see or at least squint and imagine both landscapes, the civilizational one and the personal one, and the question now is how do we act inside them? That is part six. I will see you there.