

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Greetings. last year, last November, I think, I laid out some big directional, headings and policy prescriptions, for solving the metacrisis. Today, I wanna try something, more practical and perhaps more insightful. I would like to highlight a group of small, specific, and slightly unordinary things that you and I can actually do in our own lives to respond to the more than human predicament, AKA the metacrisis.

[00:00:41] So first, a bit of context on the metacrisis itself. The best way I can define the metacrisis is that our biggest challenges, it turns out, are not really separate problems. They are all symptoms of one large, complex, interconnected system. We've crossed seven of the nine planetary boundaries. The cheap, high-quality energy that built all of what surrounds us is depleting.

[00:01:08] We're papering over the gap with more and more electronic claims, AKA debt, and much more to come. Monitored wildlife populations are down something like three-quarters just in my lifetime. More and more of us, especially young people, are anxious or lonely or hooked on supernormal stimuli that we carry in our pockets.

[00:01:33] our politics have hardened into these tribal signaling contests where the loudest ape tends to win, and the loudest ape, as we're discovering, often isn't the wisest or the kindest. artificial intelligence is speeding all of this up, including the risks. And trust in our institutions, in the media, in each other is kind of draining away And underneath the whole thing, there's a increasing meaning crisis where a lot of people sense that somewhere down deep, the story we've been living inside just isn't true anymore.

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[00:02:19] And even if it were true, it's turning out to not be so meaningful. So the painful part of laying this all out is that this is not going to be fixed. The metacrisis is a predicament, not a problem. So it can be softened slightly, quite a lot, or not at all, depending on what we humans do individually and collectively over the next decade or two.

[00:02:51] But what I've come to believe, based on twenty plus years of this work in complexity science, is that in complex systems, tiny differences in the starting conditions can lead to wildly different outcomes down the road. So in that sense, we're not really choosing the future. It's more like we're seeding it.

[00:03:14] And I'm increasingly leaning into that frame. And what each of us does now shifts the initial conditions of the next stretch of time, and that in turn shifts what becomes possible in the stretch after that. Okay, one more context thing. Most of these what can I do lists of responses and actions blur together protecting yourself and your family from what's coming and actually changing what's coming.

[00:03:48] But there is an important difference, I think. Some things will primarily just help you personally weather the storm. You grow and store some food, and you improve your sleep, and you find the others that you can lean on in these times. These things help you cope and even thrive, but they don't much change the storm itself.

[00:04:15] So everything I'm gonna suggest today is aimed at cloud seeding the storm itself. And yes, these suggestions are at the scale of an individual human life, but if enough of us, do these same things, it might be enough to move something out there in the world that solves or ameliorates, the metacrisis So to be explicit, nothing I offer here is primarily intended as just a coping skill.

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[00:04:47] Every one of these suggestions is a seed of something our entire system actually needs. And if they make your own life better too, that's a nice bonus, but that really isn't the point, or at least not the core point of this channel and our work. Okay. Long-winded intro. Here are some unordinary interventions for the metacrisis in no particular order.

[00:05:25] Measure your returns in something other than money. Okay, so try this. When you next invest or spend your time or your energy or your money on something, ask yourself what it actually gives you as a return, and don't denominate your answer only in dollars or in euros if you live in Europe or whatever.

[00:05:51] Maybe the return was an improvement in your health, or a better friendship, or a local ecosystem that you helped to recover, or an animal that's still out there in today's world because of something you did, or just something beautiful that exists now that didn't before. Money creates this nasty recursive feedback loop where more money tends to seek more money, and it pulls everything into this monetary vortex until dollars are the only thing left on our scoreboard.

[00:06:30] We have almost completely financialized the human experience, so take one part of your life back and measure it in wide boundary capital instead Rehearse loss before it shows up. Again, research on loss aversion shows that we feel losses emotionally about twice as intense as we feel equivalent size gains, and the coming decades are going to have real losses in them.

[00:07:02] And a society that can't accept less is gonna fight like hell to keep more, and I think that fight is one of the ways this whole thing ends badly. So rehearse material loss now while it's still cheap and of the dress rehearsal variety And I suggest actually rehearsing it, not just sit around thinking about it.

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[00:07:30] for instance, pick one of the next few weeks or even months and live on thirty percent less of what you're living on today. Cut the spending or the driving or whatever it is for you and find out empirically what you actually miss and what you don't. Most people, including me when I've tried this, find that miss list is shorter than they would have expected.

[00:07:58] Relatedly, write down your enough. So our current culture is pretty good at defining enough for you, for us, and its answer is always gonna be a little bit more than whatever you currently have. So sit down and specifically write this out. What does enough actually look like for you in terms of income or house or stuff or, social status and recognition a-and all the things?

[00:08:33] Then start bringing your fixed cost down towards that number, and let that gap that frees up be a form of biophysical spaciousness instead of just a gap to fill with more pecuniary stuff. And once you actually know at a gut level your own enough, then I think Moloch and the superorganism growth machine lose some of their power over us.

[00:09:05] Advertising would have less to work with. Somebody who seeks and needs less is a whole lot harder to manipulate and push around.

[00:09:17] Apprentice someone younger. Wide boundary understanding and skills right now mostly reside in scattered individuals, and, these things tend to die with them unless they get handed down on purpose. So find one younger human and share what you've actually got, whether it's a skill or a way of seeing the world or maybe a place you love or some hard-fought wisdom you've gained in your life.

[00:09:48] None of the other seeds that I'm outlining here will outlive us unless people do this one. 'Cause human cultures do not change by some policy or decree from the top. They change by transmission from human to human, person

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to person, and the younger generation is going to need this. The older among us are gonna have to step up and share.

[00:10:14] The young people hold the future of humanity and the biosphere. Lower your dopamine peaks, says Nate So our brains don't really respond to how good something is. They respond to how good it is compared to what we were expecting. And in our culture, we've pushed our expectations up so high that now ordinary life feels like a bit of a letdown.

[00:10:43] Take the phone. Most of us pick it up something like a hundred times a day, and each time we do that, there's a small burst of neurotransmitter. And you do that for a few years or, gulp, decades, and your baseline of expected neurotransmitter drifts higher. And then one day, a walk in the woods or a meal with somebody you love registers as flat and boring by comparison.

[00:11:15] And the walk and your friend didn't get worse. It was the threshold in our brain of experiencing them had moved up. There was a study my board member just sent me recently where researchers left people alone in a room for up to fifteen minutes with nothing to do except sit with their thoughts. The only thing in the room was a button that would deliver a mild electric shock if they pressed it.

[00:11:40] And even though they knew the shock was painful, and earlier in an interview, they said they would pay money to avoid the shock, two-thirds of the men and a quarter of the women still chose to press it rather than to sit still for that time. This is a glimpse of how uncomfortable stillness has become for us, perhaps especially men.

[00:12:05] So pick one thing you reach for without really ever thinking to. For a lot of us, it's the phone. Could be the martini after work or the sports betting app or porn or sugar. And don't quit it. Just insert, inject some friction in its way, kind of

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a speed bump of sorts, to cut down how often and how high that dopamine peak comes.

[00:12:35] Maybe charge the phone in another room overnight, not your bedroom, and have a beer on a Friday instead of a martini every night. Or, as I learned from Audrey Tang, turn the phone to grayscale so your brain stops getting the color hit every time you open your phone. Give it a few weeks and notice what starts coming back.

[00:12:57] I did this with sugar last year, and blueberries were frickin' amazing. It might be freedom that comes back. Curate your status environment. Human brains evolve to calibrate status against maybe 150 people, and now our media and our phones suddenly have swapped us to have access to eight billion, for most part, and none of us having a say in that.

[00:13:26] So take that calibration back. Spend more of your time around people who don't much care about status, or if they do, they admire the right things, like someone who's kind and patient with children or dogs, or who put up a full pantry for the winter, or who can actually sit and play an instrument, or who pauses and reflects before they answer a question.

[00:14:01] I've been noticing that in people. That's a sign of status to me. And be a transmitter, of this yourself. Say it out loud when you admire the fixers and the growers, and the caregivers in your life. We tend to become whatever our little reference group rewards. I learned this firsthand when I first left Wall Street cubicles and moved to be next to farmers, and it was quite eye-opening. Coordinate with a small group of close friends.

[00:14:37] At its core, the metacrisis is a coordination failure, and let's call them the manipulators, the dark triad types in our society, they tend to proliferate in their social impact exactly when the rest of us are scattered and alone and

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uncoordinated, the way that predators pick off isolated prey on the savanna, except now the prey are fellow humans.

[00:15:03] It gets a whole lot harder for these types in our society when ordinary people are actually working and coordinating together in groups. So find three to eight or so folks and do a real thing together on a regular basis, whether that's a food buying club or a maker space, local tool library, or just a monthly work party at someone's house, and maybe the one-- be the one who, starts this or hosts it.

[00:15:37] And every once in a while, do something physically hard together like, a harvest or build something at someone's house because we don't really build deep trust, when we're having coffee or in an online chat group. We build it when we're tired and complaining and sharing our toils and worries alongside somebody.

[00:16:02] I'm gonna say more on this coordination in small groups, in the future as I think it's a deep driver and a possible response to what we face. Break the chain of negativity. So our moods are contagious to others more than we'd like to admit, and dread and cynicism spread from person to person pretty much the same way a virus does, and fast.

[00:16:31] And right now, the sentiment running through most of our, networks is pretty negative, which is understandable, given world events. So my advice is to function like a circuit breaker. Be the one who walks into a heavy room and brings a little lightness, who smiles at a stranger, who does the small kind thing first without waiting to see if it gets returned.

[00:17:00] I'm not suggesting you ignore our constraints and, the current, Mordor lemming marathon. I'm asking you not to be one more person wallowing in and then passing along despair. That takes a sort of courage, actually. Be wrong in

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public. So much of our polarization runs on the social cost of changing one's mind, which means hardly anyone ever does it, especially publicly.

[00:17:35] But you're going to be wrong about something this week. Everybody is. So the move is to notice it, to catch it, and say it out loud instead of letting it slide past. "I was wrong about that, and this is what changed my mind," in front of other humans, not just your dogs I've had to do this more than once on this channel and will be doing it, a lot more, like peak oil being November 2018.

[00:18:10] and every time I admit an updated view, I brace for people to think less of me. And every time, well, almost every time, it goes the other way. Saying you've changed your mind out loud costs you almost nothing, but it then lowers the price of everyone who's listening to update their own priors in turn.

[00:18:40] And a culture that is able to update like that instead of just retreating to our insecurities might be a culture that can still change and steer, as events arrive. Treat today like the tomorrow you keep promising. We all do this, including and especially me. we make these fancy well-meaning plans to change, start eating better, start working out, start living differently.

[00:19:13] I'm gonna do it starting tomorrow. And then we wake up, and suddenly tomorrow has become today. And so tomorrow is tomorrow, and we push it out one more day. This isn't something to feel badly about, like a character flaw, because we evolve this way as animals. We're built to discount the future, to reach for the reward that's close and defer the cost that's far off.

[00:19:46] But just about every real response to the metacrisis is gonna require some of us, and then a lot of us, to stop waiting and start acting. So for this intervention, pick one thing that you keep promising to begin for tomorrow and do a little of it today or right now. Take your shoes off and stand on the ground.

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[00:20:13] Sounds small and almost silly, but it underlies one of the foundational aspects of the more than human predicament. We've put layer after layer between our bodies and the actual earth, leather and concrete and rubber and floors. For many of us, there are whole days where we never once touch anything that's alive.

[00:20:40] And somewhere along the way, between the Neolithic and the Industrial Revolution, we stopped really feeling that we're animals who belong to an earthly place, which matters because we don't embody or protect what we don't feel connected to. So take your shoes off, go stand on the grass or in the dirt or in a, a cold creek, and don't do it as some woo wellness ritual.

[00:21:12] Just do it to close the gap, for a moment and to remember in your own body that there is a living planet under all of us that we depend on for everything. Learn one pre-industrial skill badly Just about everything in our lives arrives, as you all know, via a giant global just-in-time system that we can't see and we don't control.

[00:21:41] and that entire system runs on cheap available energy and credit and complexity that are increasingly precarious. Watch the recent Jeff Curry episode if you need convincing. So learn to grow one food or crop, or learn a musical instrument so you can be a foundational node, for community. Or learn to fix one type of broken object.

[00:22:06] There's tons of possibilities, and I do mean about learning it badly, because learning it perfectly would be very difficult. You don't have to be any good at it. You just have to be the one person who knows how or is learning how, because there are really very few people doing this. Every skill like that which comes back into ordinary people's hands is a tiny bit of productive capacity rebuilt outside the superorganism, outside the machine.

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[00:22:41] And a lower energy world is gonna need millions of people who know how to make things and mend things and fix things, and that knowledge only survives if we start relearning it now while it's still in the hobby category and not yet in the holy crap necessity category. Shift the odds for one species.

[00:23:08] Saving a single animal in distress is easy and it feels good. You put the fledgling robin back up in the nest. You escort a wolf spider out of the bathtub. I did this recently, was very proud of myself. These are things many of us have done, and it means the whole world to that one creature. But in the wider scheme, nothing upstream in our world has actually changed.

[00:23:35] So the less ordinary move is to shift the survival odds for a whole lineage, so that animal's offspring and then their offspring have a better shot at making it through the bottlenecks of the 21st century. And it turns out the things that do that are mostly about subtracting what's killing them, not adding a little habitat here and there.

[00:23:58] So on one theme, keep the cat inside, because our cats kill more birds in this country than windows and cars combined. Put decals on the windows that birds hit. That's another six hundred million a year. And during spring and fall migration, turn your outside lights off at night, because entire rivers of birds navigate over our houses in the dark, and our lights pull them down and off their natural course.

[00:24:30] And if you want to go further than your own yard, support the land trust that's buying and then connecting land tracks near where you live, or show up at the county zoning meeting that few people go to, because that's where habitat actually gets decided So rescuing saves one life today. These interventions, and there are hundreds or thousands more that need cataloging for many species, tilt a probability across generations that we will not live to see, and I think that's the point.

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[00:25:10] Relatedly, regenerate something living. My recent conversation with Boulder Sustainability Director Brett KenCairn really reframed this one for me. Climate has always been thought of as a carbon problem, but that's only probably less than half the story. We face a living systems problem. The health of the dynamic, interconnected ecosystems of life that supports everything about the Earth as we know it.

[00:25:40] By Brett's accounting, the Earth is now running at something like half of its biological productive capacity, and most of that damage came from how we've used the land, which creates a bright spot. Changing how we use the land can actually bring a lot of it back. About a hundred years ago, we wrecked the southern plains, and then by changing how we farmed, we pretty much completely brought them back.

[00:26:05] There are countless other examples at the regional scale, which is just the right size for people watching this program to start contributing. So find a way to put your hands in service of life somewhere close to you. Maybe turn a strip of lawn back into native plants or join, ecological restoration day in your community or start one if there isn't one.

[00:26:33] Living systems are geared to heal, and they can heal on their own if humans leave them alone. But the beautiful part, potentially, of this story is that humans can also accelerate that healing and be integrated with these ecosystems once again. Yes, simultaneous with that work, we are swimming against a global metabolism, but every square meter of land we bring back is real capacity that we're handing forward to the future.

[00:27:05] Last but not least, and this one may sound like self-help, but it's not, train like you'll be needed. The carbon pulse has made comfort and convenience the default path for a great many of us, so push yourself physically, intellectually, spiritually in the ways that you alone know what's exactly needed.

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[00:27:32] Because when our cultural conversation and action that we've been discussing on this platform finally arrives, that moment is going to need capable nodes, and the mycelium, invisible now, the cultural mycelium underneath us, will only be as strong as the humans that comprise it. And my, recently delayed series, Guide to Staying Human, is gonna address this category.

[00:28:03] I'm three episodes in and probably a dozen. I'll be, unpacking this all later this year. At its core, it's really a self-help guide from cognitive Nate to emotional in the moment Nate. so much more on this category, but I'm inviting you basically to step up, as I continue to invite and cheerlead myself to.

[00:28:29] So there's the list, provisional as per usual, and none of these are going to solve the metacrisis because nothing will solve the metacrisis. That was never really the goal. The goal is to affect it and to, lessen aspects of it and re-steer it in a different direction and change the starting conditions.

[00:28:52] Each one of these suggestions that I've just shared is a small push on one of the bigger things that's actually driving our predicament. And how those drivers, continue or don't likely decides which future we end up landing in. And I think if one person does these things, it's a healthier and saner life for them and their family.

[00:29:20] If thousands do them, it's some sort of subculture. But if millions of people do these things, the drivers themselves might start to move, and things become possible five or ten years out that, that just aren't possible today. Little pockets of people who've got it somewhat together, scattered through an increasingly fauxed world can end up shifting the whole thing and, those pockets always start with individuals doing slightly unordinary things.

[00:29:59] See you next week.