

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Hello. I should be giving an update on the situation in the Middle East where the USA is, continuing to commit slow-motion economic and geopolitical self-destruction. Saudi export capacity is crippled, by the Ansar Allah attacks. Diesel in the USA is six dollars, approaching seven dollars and rising.

[00:00:27] The Strategic Petroleum Reserve emergency oil caverns are hitting new lows. Global bond yields are breaking out due to inflationary expectations. Certain motor oil products at Costco have purchasing caps and limits and the like. But instead, I feel compelled to look two or three steps ahead at what the real work is for us now, if we look not at the headlines, but at the systemic implication for coming years and decades.

[00:01:06] Because the real work is complex and intense, this will be a bit of an intense and raw episode, though in some ways reviewed, but hopefully clarifying and hopefully helpful. The reason I do this work is that I deeply care about the delta between society's cultural expectations and institutional plans for the future and the encroaching biophysical and ecological reality, and the gap between those is large and widening.

[00:01:47] I don't know how I ended up here, but what I wanna do now is educate, inform, inspire, shine a light on the real paths ahead of us instead of the cargo cult, high status, comforting, grandiose narratives that are popular in the mainstream media. I feel that with what I know, with who I know, and now with this small platform, we can at least in some small way help st-ster the future away from the current default.

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[00:02:25] So what does that specifically mean for the work needing to be done now? I've said before what we face is not a problem with a solution, but a predicament with responses. A problem is something you solve and move on from. A predicament you live through. And how we live through this one is going to matter enormously.

[00:02:47] So the question of the work ahead is really a question about responses, and I think given the biophysical and ecological logic of the system science story I've put together over the last 25 years, it boils down to four core categories of work that emanate from the logic of The Great Simplification.

[00:03:06] This isn't the only work that needs to be done, but this is the work that isn't being done at large scales, because our culture is blind to this particular configuration. So to summarize the situation, and viewers here have been long aware of the core logic, so I will be brief. We are a social species, an apex predator that spread out across the world, and once hierarchy and surplus became prominent, that snowballed.

[00:03:35] And we started to mine historic caches of oil and gas and coal and non-renewable minerals at high quality, high quantity, and scale. And all these, combined with machines, turbocharged our global economies, our expectations, our civilizational complexity. But now we are reaching a phase shift in that story, and there is an economic and financial cul-de-sac ahead of us where our paper and digital claims, are starting to meaningfully exceed our biophysical and ecological means I believe some sort of deflationary depression is now inevitable, whether in five months or 15 years.

[00:04:28] And such a fiscal depression is very different from saying we don't have enough stuff. It's saying that our financial claims on what we believe we have will at some point have a Wile E. Coyote reconnection date with what we really do have. And this is likely to manifest first in the global bond and then currency

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markets, where even as things get scarcer and raw material and commodity and energy prices go up, our inability to keep pace with that in real productivity and real GDP will, at some point, and my guess is probably sooner rather than later, though central banks will probably have an answer to the next financial crisis, but maybe not the one after that, we'll reach a too big to save situation, will cause a financial system to cascade downward a la 1929, AKA a deflationary depression.

[00:05:26] So the first of the four categories of real work is when that happens, we help society to bend and not break. Bend is a strained continuation of interconnectivity and social contracts. Break is a form of collapse. And the coming event I'm describing is not systemic collapse per se. It is the overlay of our financial architectures taking a significant haircut and the resulting complexity and supply chain risks that ensue.

[00:06:01] This almost happened in 2008 and again almost in 2020. And to forestall that, we used some of our remaining bullets in the form of central banks becoming the buyer last resort for the whole credit system. Too big to fail guarantees artificially low interest rates, the bazookas that paper over our physical and social problems and the trust in those and the number of times we can use them is finite.

[00:06:36] So how do we maintain connectivity even in, and eventually in my analysis, a lower material throughput world in the face of ten thousand mile supply chains, instantaneous global letters of credit, cheap global energy effectively relative to the past, global peace, functioning currencies, immediate transactions?

[00:07:03] How do we navigate partial failure of those integrated, mutually contingent sets of advantages without a break? Because a break means we don't just drop ten or twenty percent and then climb back to new highs, as has been the historical pattern. It means we're kicking out several rungs of the ladder that

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brought us this far in the first place Because of the overseas internet cables and the surgical gloves we import from overseas and the fertilizer made in Trinidad and Tobago and the 30,000 unique products in every single grocery store and all the things we assume will be here tomorrow because of intricate, complicated supply chains based on credit, currency, and cheap energy.

[00:07:54] So the work to bend towards a lower throughput, simpler world is, among many things, relocalized, re-regionalized supply chains, especially for basic goods, food and medicine, and spare parts that don't depend on a six-continent journey. And the work is also expanding your social capital where you live, meeting people near you, left, right, rich, poor, old, young, because those bonds will pay benefits in almost all future scenarios.

[00:08:28] And communities and watersheds do scenario planning ahead of time, which builds trust among the people charged with thinking about these things and invites imagination and creativity before they're sorely needed. And Goldilocks technology, tools and innovations that get us eighty percent of the human benefit with twenty percent of the resources.

[00:08:56] Sodium batteries, less efficient than lithium, but cheaper and with raw materials far more abundant. Things c-- that can be maintained and repaired locally without a global just-in-time umbilical cord and advanced policy working now on the interventions that seem too radical but are gonna be necessary in the not too distant future and building constituency on those things ahead of time.

[00:09:25] We've talked a lot about these things before, and I will increasingly interview experts on these things and take a deeper dive into the various fronts through these Franklys. And of course, the reality is that no one who believes the future is going to be shinier than the present is going to work on these things, which is why this platform and the global scout team of people sharing this story to others who start working on it around the world is important, I think.

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[00:09:59] Because people who can see what is coming respond with agency and creativity, and shared meaning instead of panic Okay. The second category is one I'm mostly not working on, on the TGS platform publicly, but it is a core part of the work, and that is during the coming decade, avoiding not only World War III, but explicitly avoiding a strategic nuclear exchange amongst great powers, I think is critical.

[00:10:37] Humanity's history in difficult times of economic descent, does not inspire confidence. A mishandled simplification is precisely the environment in which nations become desperate, so energy descent and conflict risk are going to be deeply coupled, which is why geopolitics periodically keeps showing up on an-- what is nominally an ecology podcast.

[00:11:05] Nine countries hold over twelve thousand nuclear warheads among them, and several are building more. And via spite or accident or aggression or mistake, we have to avoid a strategic or even moderate exchange of nuclear weapons, because if we don't, none of the other work matters if that ends up being our path, and neither do the hundreds of other things that need doing in the coming decades.

[00:11:38] Behind the scenes, I do work on mitigating those risks, and I don't talk a lot about it, because I think most people don't feel like they have agency, but it is one of the, the core pieces of the work. I—in my opinion, people should be pouring their lives into a huge disarmament campaign, a huge peace campaign now, and there are crickets as far as I can tell I personally believe there's a high likelihood that in the next few years, a nuclear device will be detonated in spite against other humans.

[00:12:17] In the past, people, including the superpowers, feared nuclear weapons in a way that we just don't today. There were large and successful grassroots, non-governmental, and governmental disarmament campaigns resulting in

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drawdown treaties and incentives to prevent the nuclear club from growing. However, in the past 80 years, in the 80 years since a nuclear blast was used on human beings, the idea of a nuclear holocaust has become a movie trope like attacking aliens or brain-eating zombies.

[00:12:56] People who conducted those past campaigns were scared to their bones, including the leaders. Now people are mostly scared of the stock market going down, and the delicate logic of war avoidance is breaking down as nations simply stop being as careful. There are new leaders who may not realize that shrinking the launch or losing time from twenty minutes to three minutes is not a good idea, or that there are thresholds of nuclear exchange beyond which nuclear winters will starve nearly everyone within a few years, including other species.

[00:13:40] And unfortunately, the most likely scenario is probably not some madman firing off a nuke. The most likely scenario is a sane political leader being advised by sane technocrats who have made the calculation or increasingly likely let AI make the calculation for them that the tactical and strategic benefits of using a nuclear weapon outweigh the risks.

[00:14:09] In fact, it has been individuals disobeying orders historically that has saved us from nuclear exchange in the past couple decades. I think it is dangerous to think that only crazy people will use nuclear weapons. And one thing that I've learned in the last few years, is that sane people are probably the most dangerous people of all.

[00:14:36] I acknowledge it may seem odd, and distasteful to speak of fiscal depression in the same video as nuclear annihilation, but they are not unrelated and neither is unlikely. I'm not gonna give odds on nuclear annihilation, but I suspect it's significantly higher than most people feel. It is not a long shot.

[00:15:00] It is one of the main classes of outcome and in our lifetimes.

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[00:15:08] The larger underlying category here and everywhere really, which is far beyond my expertise other than acknowledging it, is governance. Nationally, internationally, how are we coordinating across these game theoretic problems, which also includes things like AI and resource depletion and global heating and the like?

[00:15:34] And realigning these human systems with the future we actually want to see is probably the greatest challenge of our times. I do not plan to focus on this on The Great Simplification platform, but I will periodically highlight it as long as it-- I perceive it to be a central risk, so it is part of the work.

[00:15:58] And even bringing this up, again, on a public podcast is really a downer, and yet if it isn't spoken about, how will things change? Okay

[00:16:13] This is not in order of what my heart is drawn towards and cares about. But I think the third and fourth categories are-- need to be simultaneously coordinated with the two I just named. The third main category of this work is basically what I've wanted to focus on since I left Wall Street, which is to midwife ecosystems, species, and the biosphere through the human-caused ecological bottlenecks of the twenty-first century and avoid the worst case scenarios from technology or restraint or invention or activism, or probably all of the above, to breathe more life into the ecosphere, even if it's merely improving the default trajectory by a tenth of a degree or a tenth of a pH point in ocean acidification or ten percent more species making it through to a future where humans will have less impact.

[00:17:20] Any incremental support of the non-human living structures and non-human DNA on this planet We often hear when presented with, climate and other, dire ecological scenarios in a hand-wavingly fallback position sort of way that the planet is going to be fine. I do not personally believe the planet will be fine unless by planet people mean an inert bunch of elements on Earth.

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[00:17:51] What is not going to be fine is the level of biodiversity and complex life, the dolphins and the gorillas and the orangutans and the humans and all the wonderful species we have today. Life can revert to simplicity like slimes and jellies and stay there until burned out by our star, the sun. But to me, a planet of jellyfish and ants and roaches is not fine.

[00:18:23] It represents the loss of incredible beings and diversity The era of self-aware individual minds that we all happen to have been born into may be brief indeed, and there is no a priori reason to think it will happen again on Earth if we extinguish the existing lineages, as the Earth clock, that I learned about from TGS guest Peter Ward, is already quite far along.

[00:19:00] And the fossil record shows that even past humans didn't just get smarter and larger, they also got smaller and evolved to chimp-sized brains as they did on the island of Flores. What we do know is that life as we experience and value it will not be fine on its own because it is in a universe which is essentially hostile to such complex life.

[00:19:26] It seems robust and inevitable to us because that's the only kind of past that conscious abstracting minds like ours can ever see, in hindsight, the result of a lottery that we won and don't realize it. So, being in service of complex life and aiding it through the coming decades is the third category of the work.

[00:19:54] And instead of extraction and convenience and comfort and bling, we, m-many of us, hopefully, have to roll our sleeves up and contribute to defending and healing the broader planetary and ecological home which most of our ancestors felt a kinship with. Regenerating living systems is a large category of work that I will increasingly highlight going forward.

[00:20:21] If you haven't watched the Brett KenCairn episode from a couple months ago, that's a good starting place Which leads me to the fourth category,

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which underpins all the others, but is also not an immediate intervention. It is ongoing and will continue, hopefully, far beyond my lifetime, which is to re-imbue a sense of the sacred that we are connected to the web of life on Earth.

[00:20:55] I wake up in the morning, I have a coffee, I do some work that pays for my existence, but what I think is sacred are the trees and the soil and the creatures and the interconnected web of life that we're a part of, that I'm a part of where I live. And sacred here does not have to mean religious, although for some people it will take that shape.

[00:21:19] What I mean by sacred is the felt sense that some things are not for sale and not substitutable and cannot be measured in dollars and are absolutely unacceptable to lose. A functioning ocean, a dawn chorus in my field, the four billion year unbroken chain of living things that produced my dog and your children and you.

[00:21:50] It was once a common feeling in our species, I think. Many indigenous cultures thought this way and still do. Lots of humans thought this way. But the superorganism that is our, I'll recently call it, an instrumental psychopathic selection hypothesis after my recent podcast, with Greg Elliott.

[00:22:15] The superorganism has kind of severed our relationship with our sense of interbeing, as Charles Eisenstein would say. It's like we walked into a casino from a forest and we got distracted by the slot machines and the all-you-can-eat smorgasbord, and we went on a bender, and then much later we walked out and noticed, to our surprise, that the forest had somehow turned into a desert.

[00:22:45] And then we had some sadness and some remorse and some what have we done and some grief Now is the time to support what's left and to go out there and have a new story of humans and the biosphere, a story of many millions of years on a healthy world. It seems we almost had to lose or almost lose the

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biosphere by burning the carbon pulse and eight billion of us consuming more, every year.

[00:23:17] Before we could arrive at a spiritual recognition of this part of our journey as the species *Homo sapiens*, we had to change Earth's ecology in order to feel it and see it, to appreciate what it had done for us and its critical importance, and indeed that it was always fragile enough for us to change for the worse

[00:23:46] Traditional cultures understood that humans do not mature automatically with chronological age. So many of them ran initiations, a severance from the old identity, or, an ordeal, a vision quest, a rite of passage, and a return carrying new responsibilities. Humanity is in that phase now. Gratitude and awe and reciprocity with the living world, practiced imperfectly by individuals now, can become the seeds of a culture we will not live to see, but I think we're integral to it happening at all And what we're working towards is descendants who feel differently about life on Earth than our culture currently does.

[00:24:44] Maybe this is generations away, but it has to start somewhere. I believe it has started. We need the good things in the world to survive until then. That is the work. So these are some of the main initiatives that I think are, grossly underrepresented with people's efforts given today's cultural backdrop: bend not break, no nuclear war, midwife the biosphere, and rekindling the sacred Of course, there's a great deal of work to do outside of those four categories, but these are the some of the things, I feel are overlooked and our small organization is attempting to articulate, rally around and influence Some of you might reasonably ask, especially in light of the messages of some recent TGS guests, why don't you include AI alignment risk as one of the must-haves of the work, given the short timelines and existential risks?

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[00:25:55] Well, like many other aspects of the metacrisis, there are many capable people working full-time on that, and I hope and trust that they succeed. But when I was thinking about AI alignment, I had a striking thought relevant to today's overview. It turns out that we have already, for some time, had non-alignment between human good and human survival, driven by soulless, mindless, immortal automatons composed of multiple collaborating agents.

[00:26:32] We call them corporations, and they are the organizing nodes of the economic superorganism. That non-alignment problem not only vastly predates speculations about AGI, but we're living it already. If we're honest, human systems today are not aligned with humanity's future, nor the biosphere's. We are already in a common situation where if we don't do it, someone else will, so we need to be the motivator for businesses and corporations, which, by the way, are legal persons in the United States.

[00:27:12] Artificial intelligence is not, at least not yet. The problem of hyper-intelligent artificial beings ruthlessly not aligned with human interests is still hypothetical. The reality of artificial corporate beings ruthlessly, metabolically non-aligned with human interest, we refer to as business as usual and assume it's normal because we've grown up with it.

[00:27:44] Said differently, the world being laid waste and humans killing each other off long predates AI. Perhaps because I'm older and, hopefully wiser, perhaps because I've spent twenty years connecting the various dots that comprise the more than human predicament and have spent so much psychological and intellectual bandwidth on assessing and feeling our circumstances, I have arrived at what is for me both a deep and in hindsight, somewhat obvious recognition What is the meaning of life, our one life each of us has on this Earth?

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[00:28:31] It is not competition or accumulation or status or things. I have come to realize it is contributing to more life, especially complex and diverse life, and by inference, contributing to continuing the conditions of Earth's natural systems that support continued and more complex life. I think this was always true, but those systems were so stable during a human lifetime historically, so our meaning in this sense was expressed much more locally and tribally.

[00:29:12] Now the stakes are immensely higher, and the global is going to affect our local wherever we are, no matter what

[00:29:24] This is the hottest year of my life, and statistically speaking, it is likely to be one of the coolest years of the rest of my life. There is going to be more heat and disruption of Earth's stable seasons and natural rhythms coming no matter what. And at the same time, at the same time that more of us are feeling the truth of this, you could say our psychological retethering to our past, the economic supports that allowed such knowledge and feelings to emerge are going to retreat gradually and then I expect suddenly.

[00:30:03] I've inferred this before, but do not doubt that many climate campaigners, to pick one demographic, will personally demand coal power for their own families when things get tough, winters cold and summers hotter. We are right now near the peak of luxury and claims on physical wealth in the world now.

[00:30:28] And in the future, we'll need to do the right things for life and the biosphere, even without that wealth subsidy. And so it is beyond our lifetime sort of work to imbue or to invite back in a sense of what is sacred to us and a sacred duty to protect and breathe life into it. Vanessa Andreotti, and Tom Murphy talk about hospicing or abandoning modernity.

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[00:31:02] I think it's more about redefining humanity. Is a way of life less modern if it incorporates a more sophisticated understanding and feeling of complexity, ecosystems, and our kin in, in the natural world just because it doesn't have jet airliners doing a hundred thousand plus flights a day? So perhaps we can work toward a new modernity for humans.

[00:31:31] And of course, I haven't mentioned it today, but relevant throughout all this work, we're gonna need grounded, kind, aware humans with regulated nervous systems getting connected to each other, building community, shared purpose, and all the emergent effects that come from that. And hopefully, this channel can serve a role in this task

[00:31:57] How to close this admittedly stark overview, and update the work? This is perhaps what happens when I can't exercise for two weeks, after surgery. I get in this sort of mental state. We are not alive at a time of our choosing, and the stakes for humanity and the biosphere have never been higher.

[00:32:21] I'm not sure what sort of words Gandalf would have for this moment, but I will say this: Ask yourself whether your goals are worthy of the one life that you get, because most people only find out that they weren't when it's too late to choose again. And as I get older, I increasingly feel that there's a lot of work to do, a lot more to say.

[00:32:50] stay tuned.